



vol. 2

I REINCARNATED AS
EVIL ALICE.
SO THE ONLY THING I'M
COURTING IS DEATH

WRITTEN BY CHII KURUSU

ILLUSTRATED BY MINATO YAGUCHI





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I Reincarnated As Evil Alice, So the Only Thing I'm Courting Is Death!,
Volume 2
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I Reincarnated As Evil Alice, So the Only Thing I'm Courting Is Death!

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Prologue

“*PANT*... *pant*...”

Jack hurried through a small alleyway behind the old church, cutting through a night as dark as splattered ink.

The air of the alleyway reeked in a way that was entirely unlike that of the Liddell manor and its rose-enveloped grounds. He tried not to inhale any more of it than was necessary, but he knew the stench was permeating his clothes, and he would need to wash them thoroughly once he returned home.

His plans weren't supposed to keep him out so late. If he didn't make it back immediately, change back into his butler's uniform, and begin the preparations for the next morning's breakfast, he would most certainly fall under the suspicion of the twins, Leeds, Alice herself, or perhaps all of them together. For the first time, Jack realized just how pesky their sharp intuition could be.

Anyone trained in the Liddell family line of work had no trouble seeing in the dark. But if he let his guard down, he could still stumble and fall.

Misfortunes always occur when one allows oneself to be distracted.

Just as he'd forced himself to pay attention, Jack saw a light coming from up ahead.

“!”

He cloaked himself in the shadow of the church. In a part of town as unsafe as this, the only person walking the streets would be a constable on patrol. Things could get ugly if the officer spotted Jack's saber, which was currently wrapped in cloth.

Jack kept himself still, held his breath, and quieted his mind until the constable passed by.

He looked up at the sound of a quiet chime. Hazy against the cloudy night sky stood the church's steeple. The sound of that bell signaled a time of prayer to the monks inside.

Jack, after a moment of hesitation, closed his eyes and prayed.

He thought of the person dearest to his heart, and with that

fire burning deep in his chest, he prayed that his feelings might reach her. After some time, Jack felt like laughing at himself for such foolishness.

Normally, he'd never think of running to anyone else for help. Ever since the night of that tragedy in the Liddell family home, Jack had stopped believing in God.

Only recently did he learn that the only higher powers who tipped the scales here on Earth were demons, not gods. When despair piles on top of despair, the hand that reaches out to humans has no salvation to offer, but merely a contract rigged in one side's favor. Corruption is all that prospers in this world.

We can ask God for all the help we want, but that doesn't mean He'll ever save a damn soul.

Despite those thoughts, Jack didn't hate the fact that he turned to God for relief.

He wondered if all men in love acted this way. Stumbling all over himself, dreaming of his special someone smiling back at him, unable to keep his heart in check, struggling to fall asleep at night...it was the cause of so many ridiculous feelings inside him.

...Even if it also meant the betrayal of his own precious family.

He leaped out from behind the church and raced down the road toward the Liddell manor.

Jack couldn't stop now.

He knew that "Alice"—the girl who served as a stopper to his bouts of fury—was sleeping peacefully in her bed right now. Leeds had no interest in anything that wasn't his own love life, and the twins were still a few years too young to involve themselves with romance.

But these were nothing more than weak excuses. Jack knew that, deep down, he simply didn't want to drag anyone else into his own affairs.

He hoped to remain the only one so shaken by the sweet urges of lovesickness.

Yet Jack failed to notice something. As he rushed through the night, believing himself to be cloaked entirely in darkness, someone was watching him from the distance, taking in his every move.

Their eyes narrowed, and the light within them wavered like the bottom of a riverbed. A single horn sprouted from the figure's brow—proof that they could be nothing other than a demon.

A large puddle of blood was growing on the ground behind the

demon, soaking into the long hair of the person collapsed in its center. If he'd only turned his head and looked in the other direction when he was hiding in the shadow of the church, he would have noticed the tragedy that was unfolding.

But he never did.

This was the work of none other than Jack the Ripper.

God had already decided Jack's fate. He was destined to be roped into this gruesome case, but that day had yet to come.

Chapter 1: The Return of the Eccentric Earl

“**HOW** delightfully peaceful...”

I—Alice—was gazing out at the sea of fully bloomed roses that filled the garden.

With my elbows pressed against the garden table, I stared up at the bright-blue, cloudless sky above.

I held a single cup filled with Darjeeling tea—the first harvest of the season. Its crisp taste paired finely with a side of summer pudding smothered entirely in berry sauce, which I was already enjoying my second helping of. Despite my slender figure, I was, without a doubt, overeating.

Forget about your weight. A birthday isn't the only day of the year where it's all right to treat yourself.

I opened my mouth wide, bit down on a piece of sponge cake—thoroughly soaked with the red sauce—and felt the sweetness overwhelm my tongue. Almost everything in this world paled in comparison to the pure bliss of eating desserts.

“So delicious!”

Seated on either side of me, as I clutched my cheeks with my hands and squirmed, were the Tweedle brothers. With their light-blue eyes and wide pupils, the two cautioned me about being too relaxed in cold, emotionless voices.

“Alice, a period of peace always comes before another tempest.”

“Alice, it's always calmest before the storm.”

The two harsh realists each wore straw hats with checkered gingham ribbons—accessories that hardly matched their words. But their foreboding warnings weren't enough to sour my good spirits. In fact, I hadn't felt so cheerful in quite some time. A positive heart wasn't swayed by things like negative words.

“The inevitable ending only makes an experience all the more precious. There's no point in holding back when you want to enjoy yourself!”

Only one month earlier, we'd been running around London in

search of the culprit behind the mysterious “Sleeping Beauty” cases. In the end, the culprit’s motive turned out to be connected to my past, and the sad series of events that followed was somewhat traumatic to me.

Still, they were thrilling days that remained dear to my heart. There was never a moment when I didn’t feel like I had to move at full speed, lest I be outrun by the world around me and lose everything.

As always, “Alice” is living a life entirely unlike that of a normal noblewoman!

I spoke of my identity like an outsider for a specific reason. I was someone who possessed memories of another life I lived before this current one.

I’m sure you might be confused about all this, so allow me to explain it like you’re playing the sequel to an otome game!

Before all this, I lived the life of a plain, unremarkable office worker. One day, when I jumped into the street to rescue a kitten, I was hit by a truck, killed, and reincarnated as the heroine of my favorite otome game—*Evil Alice’s Lover*.

My new name is Alice Liddell. I’m the beautiful young daughter of a baron, with eyes and hair the exact color of blood.

At the mere age of sixteen, I’m the head of my entire family name, and my role is to make use of my natural bravery and intelligence to solve the dreadful crimes of London that would otherwise remain unresolved. In other words, I’m more like an antiheroine in this world.

When I first realized I’d reincarnated as Alice, I was thrilled enough to jump for joy.

I mean, my face was no longer the plain one my parents gave me. I was a beautiful young girl, drawn by the hand of a masterful illustrator! I even got to live in the same dimension as my bias. Just imagine losing the screen that separates you from *your* bias. You get to see them, breathe the same air as them, and even touch them with your own two hands.

It’s like you’ve died and gone to heaven...!

While I was busy enjoying my days of happiness, before I knew it, July was already upon us.

Despite this being the world of a video game, we still did experience a change in seasons, so the summer months were quite hot. In fact, we’d relocated our tea party from the conservatory to

the garden, seeking a pleasant breeze around the fountain.

My garden, with its walls of rose-adorned hedges that formed a labyrinth, was my favorite place in the world.

We'd placed an iron table and chairs near the fountain, shaded ourselves from the harsh rays of sun with a large parasol, and formed the perfect space for an afternoon tea party. However, on days when there was no wind to beat out the stagnant hot air, I made use of a folding fan to create a nice draft.

Since this world was set in Victorian London, we had no access to things like electric fans and air conditioning. Women were also strictly forbidden from showing any skin. Our skirts always reached down to our ankles, and we definitely couldn't wear pants.

As "Alice," the heroine of an otome game, my everyday clothes remained uniform. I always wore black dresses with white aprons that were essentially identical regardless of the time of year.

Although, that's not exactly true. My outfits may look the same, but they do change. My summer dress is thin with fewer layers, and I had my new apron made with double the frills around the sleeves!

This new outfit was lighter and more comfortable. I would hardly mind a bit if summer never ended at all.

"You two ought to enjoy the summer too, Dum and Dee. It will be here again in a year, but for now, this summer's the only one you'll get."

Back in my past life, when I was much more asocial, I hated summer and its constant invites to things like festivals, barbecues, and camping trips. But now that I'd reincarnated, I understood why summer had everyone so proactive.

The brilliant rays of sunlight were enough to breathe life into my heart. Heat roused my motivation. It was a season that made me feel as if I could do anything.

"There's no point in holding back?"

"When you want to enjoy yourself?"

Dum and Dee cast restless glances toward the fountain.

The pair's faces were completely identical, except for the black moles underneath their eyes—on Dum, the older twin, it rested below his left eye; on Dee, the right. Dum always spoke first between the two of them, so even if I couldn't see their faces, I had no trouble telling which was which.

By the way, these two boys were also potential love interest characters from the game.

The twins served as “Alice’s” protective warriors, although on the inside, they were still only ten years old. It was important to remember that they had a fun-loving side.

“I’ll save two slices of cake for you, so why don’t you go play in the garden?”

“Yay!”

“Yay!”

The collars of their summer sailor uniforms bobbed as the boys hopped out of their seats in hot pursuit of the yellow butterflies circling the fountain. The adorable way they were almost skipping reminded me of wild rabbits.

If only I had a smartphone with me, I could record them and save that video forever!

While the Industrial Revolution had resulted in the invention of various products, electronics were still, of course, a long way off. There were means of producing photographs, but they required the subject to sit still for a long period of time. A method of capturing a memory in a single, instantaneous manner didn’t currently exist.

I’ll burn the image into my mind. It’s time for my memory to shine!

I opened my eye as wide as they could go. Making maximum use of my hippocampus and its ability to form memories, I watched Dum make a beeline for the fountain, while Dee approached it from another angle, trapping a butterfly between them.

Saying that the two were dedicated to the sport of bug-catching would be an understatement. As I mentally praised my boys for their strength, I watched the two of them begin to fish around in the pockets of their short-sleeved shirts.

Startled, I raised my voice right there on the spot.

“Dum, Dee! No weapons!”

The two wide-eyed twins turned around to look at me. They’d retrieved a dagger and a crossbow that were hidden on their person.

“Really? No weapons?”

“Really? No weapons?”

“That’s right. You can cock your heads however cutely you want, but that’s a rule.”

I crossed my arms to show that I was serious. Reluctantly, the twins returned the weapons to their hiding places.

Dum and Dee were well versed in battle, and if the two made use of their full physical potential like they tried with that butterfly,

I imagined there was no creature in the world that could escape them. *I'm just glad they're happy and healthy...*, I thought as I watched over them, but I always felt bad for any bug on the receiving end of such ferocity, so I made a point to stop them whenever I spotted them in action.

"Such energy those two have. My poor little legs would give out on me if I ran around like they do."

A young man with long hair tied up and draped over one shoulder took a seat at the table.

His name was Leeds. He was a beautiful man with droopy, sensual eyes and an effeminate way of speaking. For the Liddell family, Leeds drew from his colorful life history to serve as an advisor to "Alice."

As he always kept up on the evolution of beauty and fashion, even to the point of knowing the popular trends in Paris at any given time, he was the best bet when it came to fashion advice. In fact, most of my clothes were made with input from Leeds.

The chain belt and dark shirt Leeds wore were eye-catching, but the most noticeable part of his outfit was the flashy scarf wrapped around his neck. Its dark pink color was in such stark contrast to the rest of him, Leeds's head practically looked like it was floating unattached to anything else at all.

He was also the absolute last character you'd ever want to challenge if you ran into him on the street.

"Once you're my age, instead of busying yourself with trying to catch things, you have to think about how to avoid getting caught by anyone else. Gosh, I'll be an old man in the blink of an eye, won't I? How utterly dreadful."

Despite phrasing it as if he were middle-aged, Leeds was only twenty-five years old. His flawless skin revealed not a single sign of aging to any observer.

"By the time you're an old man, I'll be an old lady too."

I imagined a white-haired, stooped-over elderly Leeds alongside myself in a similar state. It warmed my heart from the inside out. Such an outcome would be proof of the long lives we managed to live together.

During my past life back in Japan, antiaging was the primary objective of beauty treatments. Looking younger than your actual age was a display of status. But now, in a world where my fate was intrinsically linked with death at all times, I looked forward to

showing my age with each year lived.

Each year lived with my beloved family, to be specific.

Otome games are really annoying in that regard. Aside from the character whose true ending you reach, the rest of the cast almost always ends up separated.

The true ending of an otome game route usually finishes with a typical heartwarming marriage scene. It isn't unusual for the final illustration to be a wedding between the heroine and the love interest, and in the end, the unchosen characters usually go their separate ways.

But this was a mistake, in my eyes.

Many women aspire to be someone's bride, which is why it's unavoidable in games such as these. But there's more than one way for a woman to achieve happiness.

If I had the chance to make my own otome game, I'd set up an extra-special "everyone lived happily ever after together!" true ending.

"I hope to spend the entirety of my long life with all of you."

As I pictured that distant future, Leeds chuckled and remarked, "You worry too much, my lady. Of course we'll be together, since we all love you to death. You'll never be able to shake any of us off! Allow me to demonstr— Ow!"

A projectile scone struck Leeds in the forehead as he tried to wrap me in his arms.

It was a young man with black hair and a messily worn butler's uniform who had chucked the pastry like a baseball from nearly thirty feet away. His name was Jack.

"What the hell are you doing to Miss Alice...?"

"What on earth do you mean? It was simply an affectionate embrace."

Leeds, gripping the scone he'd been on the receiving end of, pleaded his case with teary eyes.

"But more importantly, how can you call this a scone? It's crumbly and overcooked!"

"Well, at least it's not raw. It's hot outside, so leave me alone already. So bloody annoying..."

Jack pulled a serving cart up to the white tablecloth of our table.

The cart was covered in fluffy scones and bite-sized cakes, while trails of warm steam puffed from the main dish. Whatever it

was, it was freshly cooked and looked delicious.

“These smell lovely.”

“That’s the flapjacks. It’s just oats, butter, sugar, and some golden syrup on the top to soak in. I let it cook until it was crispy, flipped it over, and that was that. I’ll go ahead and slice it up now,” Jack said, lifting up a large knife.

Jack was “Alice’s” butler and a servant to the Liddell family. He single-handedly managed the kitchen and gardens, and he also handled miscellaneous tasks like ironing the newspaper each morning. He was an absolutely essential part of our household.

While his appearance made him easy to mistake as a delinquent, he was a diligent and caring person on the inside. Perhaps his only flaw was his emotional personality, which often took the form of uncontrollable rage.

Just like Leeds and the twins, Jack was another love interest from the original game.

As a character who was always driven by devotion to serve his master, the game’s heroine, he’d stolen the hearts of an immeasurable number of players. Jack was my ultimate bias, too, in all honesty.

My adoration for Jack had known no bounds. I’d collected loads of his merch for my own fandom altar and even celebrated his birthdays and the game’s anniversaries by posting photos on social media.

Since I died and reincarnated into this world, I had no idea what happened to that altar, which took up an entire corner of my tiny apartment. I could only hope those items had ended up in a secondhand goods store, hobby shop, or online market so that they could find their way to a new owner.

Jack finished slicing the flapjacks into strips and piled them onto separate plates for each diner.

“I did a pretty good job charring them just how you suggested, my lady, so I think they’ll be good.

“You did a ‘good job charring’? Did you learn how to caramelize?” asked Leeds, furrowing his brow.

I pointed at the flapjacks and helped out with an explanation.

“Since it sounds like it’s difficult to control the temperature of our oven, I suggested that Jack familiarize himself with treats that can be cooked quickly with high heat. Flapjacks are delicious as long as they’re not outright burnt, so I thought they’d make perfect

practice.”

The scones were a bit overcooked, but they were still well-made.

Leeds seemed disinterested as he bit into a sliced flapjack. After chewing a bit, he let out a little gulp, swallowing the bite.

“Why, this is as sweet as my lady herself. Can I request Eton mess for next time? It’s a simple, sour strawberry sauce poured over baked meringue. I just love the stuff. It’s like a taste of life itself in every bite.”

“Your life must be a lot of fluff, huh?”

Despite his refusal to chitchat with Leeds, Jack did promise that he’d learn how to make Eton mess in the future. I knew that, hard worker that he was, Jack was likely to be serving us burnt meringue as early as tomorrow’s teatime.

Jack wiped his hands on a cloth and called out to Dum and Dee, who were still racing around the fountain.

“Hey, twins. Unless you’re planning on eating one of those butterflies, knock it off and get over here.”

The boys froze and puffed their cheeks, pouting.

“You never know until you try, Jack.”

“It can’t hurt to try, Jack.”

“Don’t start with me. Your stomachs will pay for it if you actually try to eat any of those things. Besides, butterfly wings lose their scales when people touch them, which means they can’t fly around anymore. Is that what you want?”

“Poor butterfly...”

“Poor butterfly...”

“That’s what I thought. Go sit down and eat what I made. I haven’t got tarts down yet, but today’s treats turned out pretty nice.”

Once the twins were in their seats, Jack poured two glasses of iced milk tea and set them down in front of the boys. Leeds poured his own cup of coffee from a pot, then refilled my empty teacup with piping-hot black tea.

“Ah... This is bliss...”

It had been a while since the peace of Great Britain was upset by any criminal incidents, and now that the social season was over, many noblemen and noblewomen had returned to their local territories as well. The need to attend their stuffy parties left along with them.

On top of all that, I was free from the constant visits paid to my home by a certain someone. I felt liberated from my troubles, and the world around me seemed to sparkle in the summer sunlight.

"I can't believe I finally, *finally*, get to enjoy my days with my family! I don't have to hear any more fuss about that man adopting Dum and Dee, or all this talk of having an engagement party. I feel like giving a standing ovation to the entirety of my life!"

"I hate to interrupt the applause..."

"Eek!"

The sudden appearance of a deep voice from behind me caused me to flinch. Fearfully, I turned around to follow the sound. There stood a beautiful young man on the small path between the rosebushes—the very man who was supposed to have departed from London that very morning.

"What...are you doing here...?"

"I've returned. I simply couldn't stand to be apart from you."



The large bow around his hat bobbed with each step forward. He wore a jacket accented with lace and frills, overdecorated to the point of resembling a theatrical costume.

The man with a strange taste in fashion was Dark Arland Knightley, an earl. He was also currently stalking me in an attempt to win my hand in marriage. Dark was a newly added love interest from the otome game, appearing in DLC titled *Evil Alice's Fiancé*.

Dark was a handsome man, as one would expect for someone who'd amassed many fans even when he was merely a side character. Even his voice was performed by a famous voice actor. He was a tall, intelligent earl—the perfect embodiment of any woman's dream man.

Men and women, both young and old, couldn't resist those sapphire-like blue eyes. There was no escaping the blow to the heart you took just by looking at him...unless you were me.

"I see. Well, I didn't mind being apart from you at all, so feel free to forget all about me and be off already. You can leave the way you came in," I ordered him coldly, pointing toward the other side of the garden.

I was already surrounded by beautiful love interest characters on a daily basis. Looks alone weren't enough to win my heart. After all, I was a hardened otome gamer... No, an otome game *heroine*.

I turned my head away, but Dark placed his fingers along my jaw to pull my gaze back toward him.

"Very well. I'll be out of here straightaway once you've given me a goodbye kiss."

"Ki—?! There's no point in that!"

"What's got you so flustered? It wouldn't be our first."

"I didn't have a choice with the last one! It was an emergency!"

"It's not like you were against it. After all, you're in love with me."

"...!"

Blood rushed to my face when I saw that sweet smile.

I left out a few important details about Dark. His true identity is that of a demon who can see into the heart of anyone he kisses.

There was no hiding something like secret love in the face of such an otherworldly power.

The devs of this game really heaped all the special character traits

onto Dark!

I wished I could fill out a lengthy player survey to send to them about all this, but alas, this entire world belonged to the otome game now. There was no way to give its creators, who resided in my past life, a piece of my mind.

I pouted my lips. With an upset look on his face, Dark let out a sigh.

“Alice, you can’t react so cutely...or I might just kiss you for real.”

Dark leaned over, closing the distance between me and his beautiful face. I was unable to voice a rejection when he was this close, and my heart began to race in the presence of his romantic aura. Just as I closed my eyes, ready to accept the kiss, I heard the sharp sound of metal from next to me.

“Trying to make a move on my lady in front of us like that...”

I opened my eyes. Dark now had a saber pressed against his neck. The blade’s owner, Jack, had unsheathed it in a fit of rage.

Dee swooped to my feet, aiming his crossbow up at Dark’s brow, while Dum wrapped under my arm to stick his two daggers straight at Dark’s belly.

As for Leeds, who remained seated in his chair, he’d taken it upon himself to launch his chain belt up and over the parasol above us, leaving the weighted ball dangling above Dark’s head, threatening to crush it to bits.

“Lord Knightley, you’d be well-advised to step away from Miss Alice. Unless you feel like our rose garden could use a little more ‘red’ in it.”

“My goodness. You chaps sure know how to interrupt a kiss.”

Dark grabbed the weight and shifted it away from his head. He took a step backward, away from all the blades.

“If you’re looking for a change of colors, why not plant some bushes that will give you nice white flowers as well? While the Liddell boys busy themselves with gardening, I’ll be over here, tending to my Alice.”

“Shut your mouth. I’m not messing around!”

The gloves around Jack’s hands erupted into flames. The fabric burned away in a flash, revealing a black rose crest on the backs of his hands.

This seal was Jack’s “stigma.” It was branded onto any human chosen for resurrection by a demon. These demon children, known

as “stigmata,” also possessed supernatural powers. Jack was capable of producing flames that burned away the objects of his hatred, and when he became particularly emotional, those powers sprang into action.

“Calm yourself, Jack.”

“How am I supposed to do that? This bastard came back here just to mess with us!”

“I’m sure not even Dark is that ill-mannered. He must have had his reasons for returning. Isn’t that right?”

The light in Dark’s blue eyes flickered tellingly in response to my question. I’d guessed correctly, it appeared.

“So something happened?”

Jack subdued his flames, Dum and Dee diverted their weapons, and Leeds wrapped his chain back around his hips as a belt. When Dark saw that he was on the receiving end of worried looks from every member of the Liddell family, he spoke casually, like he was revealing nothing more than the amount of sugar he took in his tea.

“It’s difficult to say exactly... But to be perfectly honest, I’ve found myself unable to leave London whatsoever.”

“Huh?!”

“Huh?!”

“Huh?!”

With Dark’s shocking confession came the end of our peaceful summer tea party.



THE Knightley carriage raced down a road that connected London to its western bordering cities.

As we traversed the well-worn dirt thoroughfares and all the tracks left from other travelers, our passenger car lurched upward with each bump and groove. I spoke to Dark loud enough so that my voice wouldn’t be drowned out by the rattle of the carriage.

“What exactly is stopping you from leaving London?”

“It’d be easier for you to see for yourself. We’re almost there.”

At Dark’s comment, I stuck my head outside the small window. All I could see was a field of tall summer grass like a plush layer of carpet. The shadow of our carriage passed along the fluffy, pleasant-looking grounds.

It's just a big field. I can't imagine there were fallen rocks around here, or even a tree blocking the road.

But when I looked in the opposite direction, I noticed a carriage approaching ours.

It was understood throughout Great Britain that carriages were to travel on the left-hand side of the road. Many drivers held their whips with their right hands, making them unlikely to strike any other carriage with it as long as they were on the left side of the road.

However, the carriage approaching us, led by a well-groomed white horse, refused to divert to the other side. It was coming straight at us. I felt the blood drain from my face when I realized the possibility of a direct impact.

Don't tell me...is this a death flag...?

As a reincarnated soul, I feared nothing more than the death flag. *Evil Alice* wasn't simply a love story. It was an incredibly unique otome game in that the player was so likely to die, the work won the title of "Deadliest Game of the Year" following its release.

Otome games come with choices for the player to make that affect the relationships between the heroine and the love interests, but at times, those options also become a matter of life and death. This game in particular was the most dangerous of them all in that regard.

Even without the deadly circumstances of the player's choices, "Alice" still lived a perilous life all the same. The Liddell family business was most unique. We were tasked with eliminating the criminals of Great Britain who managed to evade the reach of the formal justice system.

In my past life, I adored stories of romance that were seasoned with a good dose of danger. But now that I'd reincarnated and was cursed with only a single life in this universe, it was enough to make me completely reconsider. There were moments, when I couldn't access things like quick saves and files to load, that I'd say I quite hated that kind of dynamic, in fact.

Exactly like right now!

"We're going to crash! Order your driver to divert into the field!"

"There's no need for that. We're the ones on the proper side of the road."

"This is no time to be stubborn! We're about to collide!"

I clasped my hands around my head and leaned down against my skirt, bracing for impact like during an airplane crash landing. I had no idea if that sort of thing worked on a carriage, but it was probably better than nothing.

I don't want to die here!

Squeezing my eyes shut, I gritted my teeth to avoid biting down on my tongue, then braced my feet against the ground to steady them in case the carriage went flying.

I was completely prepared for the impact; however...

Huh?

I waited and waited but never felt the blow, so I sat back up in my seat. Our carriage was running exactly as it had been the entire time. Dark rested his head in his hands and gazed out the window.

"It managed to dodge us?"

"Not quite, Alice. Take a look outside."

I followed his eyes but couldn't make out anything other than the same idyllic scenery around us. Beyond the field of summer grass that swayed in the breeze, I noticed that something had now gone missing.

"I don't see the carriage... Which means that..."

I looked outside the opposite window and saw the shadow of the carriage on the road.

"It's going the other way now. When did it change directions?"

"It never did. It's traveling straight forward, just as it always was."

"But that can't be right. It's turning back toward London."

"Indeed, it is."

Dark cast his eyes downward in thought.

"When you travel down this way, you suddenly find the road turning back the way you came. I tried many times, from many angles, but always ended up heading back toward London. I think the carriage we just saw might prove to be a good hint. Shall we get out and observe the spot where we almost collided?"

We pulled to a stop at the point in the road where the other carriage changed directions before we could crash. I stepped outside and took careful note of the road.

"I don't see any signs of an accident. The tracks all go in a straight line, so it didn't change lanes either. Where did the one from before go...?!"

I raised my head and froze in shock. The stopped carriage

behind Dark was identical to the one that had been using the wrong lane.

“Dark! Behind you...”

“Yes, that’s the Knightley carriage. It’s the one we were just inside of.”

“It looks exactly like the carriage we almost struck!”

The two vehicles shared the same gold ornaments and four lamps adorning each corner of the passenger car. As I began to wonder if they were crafted by the same maker, I saw Dark point further down the road.

“I believe *that’s* why it looked as if we were about to crash.”

Dark was standing there, off in the distance. Startled, I turned my head back, only to be met with the sight of him once more.

“Two Darks...?”

“But we’re not quite the same. Take a good look.”

The Dark up ahead in the road was reflected backward as if he were in a mirror.

I could see the scarf on his left shoulder draped over the right shoulder of the other Dark, and the horse-shaped ornament on the brim of his hat was facing outward in the opposite direction now as well.

It was as if a giant mirror sat in the very center of the road.

But my body doesn’t show up in the reflection. What’s going on?

Dark took a step forward and his reflection followed suit. The two men smiled at each other, then approached as if to collide... only for me to see Dark walking back in my direction instead. His reflection headed off in the distance, with his back turned toward us.

“How strange. It’s as if you walked straight through a mirror...”

“A *mirror*. That’s the perfect way of putting it, Alice.”

Amused, Dark turned to wave at the reflection.

The other Dark simultaneously returned the gesture.

“I imagine this strange mirror is the reason I’m unable to leave London. When I’m traveling by carriage, the entire carriage is turned back in the direction it came, and when I’m on foot, it simply returns my body and everything on it. The very same happens when I approach from another road or within the forest itself. I considered traveling by train, but returning in reverse direction on the same tracks could cause a disastrous collision with

another train, so I abandoned the idea.”

I learned that Dark had tested every possible avenue he could think of before returning to the Liddell manor. I sympathized with the exhaustion he must’ve felt upon learning that all his efforts were fruitless.

“Only a stigmata or a demon could produce such a phenomenon. If this is a stigmata’s doing, then you may have the power to destroy it yourself.”

“Shall I give it a go?”

Dark plunged his cane forward. Whitish-blue light shot forth from the tip like a shooting star, drawing out the seal of a crescent moon at his reflection’s chest.

This was Dark’s own demonic crest, and the crest of the Knightley family as well.

His pupils narrowed. Wind began to billow around him. The sparks of light that formed grew more and more vivid, until they surged toward the reflection in the blink of an eye.

So bright!

I covered my eyes with my arm to protect them from the blinding light. I could still see it glittering behind my eyelids, but after some time, the attack faded into darkness.

“This doesn’t appear to be the work of a stigmata.”

The sound of Dark’s voice prompted me to open my eyes. I saw that the light was glinting as it collapsed into mere sparks and scattered away. The reflected Dark was still standing there all the same.

But now, on the chest of Dark’s reflection lay a circular pattern that was unfamiliar to me. Inside its borders was a tightly packed wall of text.

“What is that thing?”

“It’s the mark of the demon that’s been harassing me. The words aren’t quite readable to me. I believe it might be Latin...”

Not wanting to disrupt Dark’s focused state, I made my way through to the other side of the mirror. Both the floating crest and Dark’s reflection disappeared.

“I don’t see it anymore. Do you?”

“The crest is gone, but I still see my reflection, so the mirror appears to be functioning. Since I have no idea who is responsible for this, let’s call them the Mirror Demon for now. It would appear the demon in question wants to keep me in London.”

"They must really hate you. It's too bad. The best solution, in that case, would be to simply allow you to return to your territory."

"How cold. Are you really so eager to be apart from me?"

"Of course I am!"

I squeezed my fists and began to pour my heart out to him.

"I finally had the chance to spend some peaceful time with my family, but you went and ruined it. There's no end to the amount of resentment I feel for you. The Liddell family will do whatever is needed to investigate this matter so that you can return to your—"

My sentence was cut off by a sudden embrace.

"What's the matter now?"

"You're always so cruel to me, and yet you're still willing to help. It made me happy..."

When I caught a glimpse of Dark's red ears, I felt my heart skip a beat.

"I-I haven't mistreated you at all. You're the one who flirts with me in full view of Dum and Dee and tries to kiss me when you know it will upset Jack and Leeds, and I'm only cold to you to get my warnings across."

Dark was always making advances on me with no regard for the time and place. I enjoyed it when the two of us were alone, but around others, it was too embarrassing to do anything but scold him for his flirting.

"I don't hate you as much as you seem to think. Once you leave, I always start to wonder if I was too harsh on you, or if you've come to hate me instead. It keeps me up at night sometimes..."

"Alice."

I raised my head and felt a soft peck on my lips.

"!"

"Thank you for loving me. I'll keep paying visits to the Liddell estate until I'm able to leave London again."

"Then you best arrive with expensive presents!"

Dark smirked at my rude retort. I thought his expression was cute, which clearly meant I was out of my mind. These days, I always felt like this when the two of us were alone.

I guess I don't mind if he stays in London, so long as he tones down the aggressive flirting.

Once I returned in the earl's carriage and arrived at home, my

family was already seated at the table for dinner, so I explained the situation to them.

“To summarize, Dark is unable to leave London whatsoever. This isn’t a matter that requires an urgent solution, unlike the Sleeping Beauty cases, but just keep in mind that the Mirror Demon is somewhere nearby.”

“Got it!”

“Got it!”

Despite their uniform responses, the twins were much more focused on the overcooked roast beef in front of them than on my warning.

Leeds poured wine into his empty glass with a displeased frown on his face.

“So that earl is going to keep loitering around my lady, hmm? And here I thought we’d finally be rid of that eyesore. Don’t you agree, Jack?”

“.....”

“Jack?”

Jack had been watching his overturned hourglass as he steeped a pot of black tea, but upon hearing his name for the second time, he snapped out of his daze. His jet-black eyes went wide, and for some reason, he turned to look at me.

“Did you say something?”

“What’s gotten into you? I was the one talking! Get a grip already! That earl’s demonic hands are going to be all over our lady!”

“Yeah.”

Leeds and I looked at each other when we heard such a straightforward response from Jack. There was no sign of his usual hostile retorts at all. I couldn’t even remember the last time I heard him comment on Dark without adding an “Ugh. Bloody annoying.”

After finishing dinner, it was usually time for each member of the family to go about their business freely, but I remained in the dining room to figure out what was going on with Jack.

“Jack, may I speak with you for a moment?”

He stopped removing dishes from the table, wiped his hands on a cloth, then approached me.

“What is it, my lady?”

“You’ve been very spaced-out lately. Is something troubling you?”

"I was just thinking about what to cook for tomorrow."

"Well, that's good...but could I ask a favor of you?"

I lowered my voice and revealed the true reason I wanted to talk to him.

"Please try not to leave the house much this summer. Leeds can be in charge of shopping and sending out mail, while you're to prioritize the chores close to home, like cooking and tending to the garden."

"I'm the head butler here. I'm not gonna spend my summer like some retired old—"

"Just listen!"

Jack's eyes widened at the sound of my forceful words. I felt guilty to see him so clearly unsettled. But this was an absolute necessity if I wanted to protect Jack.

"Stay here at home, Jack. I need to know you're safe."

"Fine...I will."

When I watched him nod his head, I felt a weight lift from my shoulders.

It was reassuring to know he wouldn't end up involved in that horrible case...

But a few days later, I would learn exactly how naïve I'd been in my relief.



A member of nobility never rises early in the morning. We operate on different schedules than the working class, who are always expected to show up to their jobs at a set time each day.

I rose long after the sun did, poured myself a glass of water from my side table, and opened a newspaper. There I found my eyes drawn straight to a certain article.

It's finally happening.

My attention was pulled to the aptly titled "Jack the Ripper" case.

The article told of a woman who was repeatedly stabbed to death in Whitechapel—a notoriously unsafe district of the East End. In my past life, this was known to be the work of a famous serial killer who existed in real life, but for the plot of the otome game, it was changed to a single murder case to make things simpler for the

player.

The name “Jack” itself came from a message left at the crime scene claiming responsibility for the killing.

It's all right. This can't be my Jack. I asked him not to leave the house.

I tossed the newspaper into the dustbin, changed into a casual apron and dress, combed my hair, then tied it up with a ribbon.

A noblewoman would usually get dressed in the morning with the help of a maid, but since my home employed no female servants, I was on my own when it came to grooming.

I'd managed to tie my ribbon perfectly in the center of my head, so I left my room in high spirits. I checked the wall sconces for signs of disruption before I set foot on the red carpet of the hallway.

Everything looks to be normal.

The Liddell manor was no normal home. Within its walls lay an array of deadly traps to prevent would-be intruders. My morning routine was to circle the halls and check for any signs that the traps were out of place.

Fortunately, the ones around my bedroom appeared to have remained in their normal positions.

I moved slowly, making absolutely sure not to fall into any traps myself.

As I walked down the double staircase and into the entrance hall, I heard loud knocks coming from the front door. I began to worry that the visitor's sheer strength was going to break my door knocker before anyone else could come to answer them.

I rushed to the front of the hall and pulled open the heavy door that stood at nearly twice my height.

“Hello. Who are you?”

“Two minutes and fifty-two seconds have passed since I began knocking. A slow response, even for such a large home.”

A middle-aged man in a trench coat stood in my doorway.

He peered at a pocket watch down his large, beak-like nose. With a long neck and stout body, he looked a lot like a southern hemisphere bird I'd once seen images of in a reference guide.

“I apologize for the delay. Do you have business with the Liddell family this morning?”

“What a foolish question. I can't picture a guest at a home they have no business with. As a matter of fact, we've already wasted

thirty seconds just discussing this. It's a downright shame."

The aging man shook his head in disappointment, then raised it back up to look at me.

"My name is Dodo, and I'd like to speak with the head of the Liddell household."

"That would be me, Alice..."

"My lady. I'll handle the guest."

Jack arrived from the other side of the hall and held the door open for me with one hand. Its weight had been making my arm sore, so I appreciated the gesture. However, it was then that I noticed Jack's hand was wrapped in a bandage. I wondered if he'd injured himself while cooking.

"The table's all set for breakfast, so you can go ahead and dish up."

"I'll do that. Thank you, Jack..."

As soon as I said his name, a faint light gleamed in the visitor's eyes.

"Jack's here. We have an emergency!"

A group of policemen suddenly appeared from behind the door and leaped toward Jack.

"What the hell're you doing?!"

Jack fought off each would-be attacker with his bare hands. This was the result of his vigorous daily training regimen.

I'd fled toward the wall for safety, but in the midst of the brawl, I watched the middle-aged man reach down and retrieve his pistol.

"Jack, duck!"

When he heard my scream, Jack fell to his knees on the tiled floor and lowered himself down.

Flames shot out from the barrel of the gun as a bullet grazed Jack's head. He wasn't struck, but with his body on the ground, the officers were able to pile on top of him and keep his hands pinned behind his back.

"Inspector Dodo, we've apprehended the suspect!"

This man is an inspector?

Inspector Dodo heard this and holstered the weapon inside his trench coat once more, retrieved his pocket watch, and confirmed the time.

"The time is nine thirty-three a.m., nineteen seconds past the minute. Suspect has been arrested for suspicion of forcible

obstruction of business. Take him away.”

“Wait just a moment.”

There was no way I could let them take Jack without a fight.

“You’ve caused a ruckus in my home, and now you’re attempting to apprehend my servant. What grounds do you have to accuse Jack of a crime?!”

“This man is a person of interest in the Jack the Ripper case. In fact, he’s the Jack most likely to be the culprit in all of London. I give him a ninety-five percent chance of guilt, while the rest of them together land at a mere five percent.”

“That’s impossible. Jack was here all night!”

“My lady...”

Jack, now completely tied up with ropes, looked at me with a pained expression.

“...I’m sorry.”

“Don’t tell me... Did you actually *leave* the house?”

I lost all words. It was too sudden a confession to even believe. Jack had never once broken a promise to “Alice” before.

This was the worst timing for him to do such a thing.

In the midst of my confusion, Inspector Dodo patted me on the shoulder.

“I’m sure you’ve had quite a shock, but in a town as overpopulated as London, there’s a thirty-three percent chance that someone you know has committed a crime of some sort. Would you like to know the makeup of that statistic among each specific social class?”

“I’ll pass, thank you...”

Inspector Dodo gave up once I’d given him that lackluster response.

“Then with that, I’ll be on my way. As the employer of our person of interest, I’d like you to come down to the station for questioning. I’ll send for you in two hours and twenty-four minutes, so please be at the ready.”

With that last incredibly precise demand, the inspector and his subordinates left the way he came in.

Jack was arrested by the police...

Just as my weak legs were about to fully give out, I felt a pair of strong arms wrap around me.

“The home is the kingdom that all nobility reign over. You mustn’t impede on your own dignity by losing your footing.”

“Dark...”

I wondered if he'd decided to stop by for tea like he'd mentioned before. Hisui, his servant, was behind him, carrying three gift boxes.

“I passed a bus full of policemen on the way here. Hisui told me he caught the scent of your guard dog too. What exactly happened?”

“Jack was just arrested. They said he's a suspect in the Jack the Ripper case.”

“Why him?”

“I don't know. What was Jack thinking...?”

“What's the matter, Alice?”

“What's the matter, Alice?”

I separated from Dark once the Tweedles appeared on the scene. Dark's face immediately lit up. He gracefully drew his hand to his chest.

“Good morning, you two. Alice very nearly fell asleep right here in the entryway, but she told me a very funny story. A bunch of policemen showed up here this morning and woke her right up. Look, boys, I brought you some lovely teacups made of rainbow seashells today. What do you think? May I come in?”

“My lady, what are you...? Oh my. If it isn't Lord Knightley?”

All the fuss had roused a half-asleep Leeds and led him to the front hall. Dark left me with Leeds, placed his hands on the twins' shoulders, and took Hisui and the two boys deeper into the house.

“Why's everyone at the front door? Oh, but I don't see Jack around.”

“Well...”

I explained how Jack had just been taken away by the police.

Leeds's face turned grim as he heard the entirety of my story. He then put his arms around me, hoping to comfort me with a hug.

“Don't you worry, my lady. Jack would never kill anyone—as long as it's not for work, anyway. I'm sure the police will realize their slipup and send him right back.”

“Right...”

I raised my head, trying to lift my spirits again. I still had over two hours to gather whatever information I could before my questioning.

The inspector said that the probability was high, but I don't believe it. Jack definitely didn't kill that woman.

But at this point in time, there was still so little that I knew.

I had yet to learn that the Jack the Ripper case I thought I understood was, in fact, a tangled romantic web between the most unexpected of parties.

Chapter 2: Jack the Ripper

LATER on the day of Jack's arrest, I found myself in a dimly lit interrogation room at the police station.

"The time is one ten p.m., twenty seconds past the minute. I will now proceed with my questioning regarding Jack of the Liddell household, the current person of interest in the Jack the Ripper killing."

Once he finished reading out the time, Inspector Dodo turned his back to the tall, barred window. From the old, creaky chair I'd been given to sit in, I watched him approach me with a bundle of documents relating to the case.



“Early in the morning of July fifteenth, an unidentified woman was found stabbed to death in an alleyway in Whitechapel. The victim is believed to be in her twenties to early thirties. I have with me some photographs of her body from the autopsy. Won’t you take a look?”

He placed two photographs on the desk before me. One was a close-up of the victim’s face, and the other was of her slashed-up torso. Her eyes were closed, but the woman in the sepia-colored photos wasn’t familiar to me.

“I don’t know her.”

“Is that right? I must say, I find it strange to see a girl as young as yourself so unaffected by images of a corpse. No, I mustn’t derail the conversation. We’ve already lost thirty seconds.”

Inspector Dodo remained fixed on the time. That was his way of making the subject of interrogation feel constantly pressured. On top of that, the man was walking circles around me the entire time, loudly flipping through the pages of his documents, trying to unsettle me.

I imagined he was hoping for a slip of the tongue on my part that would somehow incriminate Jack. The inspector was a person I couldn’t let my guard down around.

“The criminal identified himself as ‘Jack the Ripper’ with a statement written on the wall of the crime scene. Were you aware of this?”

“I read about it in the newspaper. However, isn’t it rash to arrest someone simply based on their name? If I was the culprit, I would be sure to use an alias.”

“Such amateurish thinking. It’s not uncommon for criminals to become so stimulated immediately following a crime that they end up doing something that defies common sense. He very well may have left his real name in an attempt to rule it out from the investigation, or even felt an intense urge to boost himself into the limelight. The likelihood of a man named Jack leaving his real name at the crime scene amounts to sixty-two percent.”

I had no idea how he was carrying out such calculations, but it appeared that Inspector Dodo was incredibly keen on blaming Jack for the crime. I decided to voice my protest, while being sure not to upset the inspector at the same time.

“Then why, specifically, are you accusing the Jack who works

for the Liddell family? It's an incredibly common name, after all."

"That comes from eyewitness testimony. We have a report of a young man in a disheveled butler's uniform leaving the area."

From his bundle of papers, Inspector Dodo retrieved a record that had been marked with a sticky note.

"The very same young man had been spotted near Whitechapel over the course of the previous month. Whenever patrolling officers questioned him about what he was up to, he always fled the scene. The Jack employed by the Liddell family, based on his physical description, is the only possible match. This is a probability of ninety-eight percent and the reason we arrested him for the crime."

I hadn't known that Jack had been visiting the East End even before I'd made my request for him to stay in the house.

Leeds often casually went into town, always saying he was going on a date, but Jack never left the house without giving the exact details of his errand and his expected time of return. I felt my heart begin to race, now that I knew about this strange, out-of-character side of Jack.

"...What was Jack doing in the East End...?"

My quiet words caused Inspector Dodo to give a snort through his large nose.

"It's an area full of poorhouses, gathering grounds, and women living in poverty. There are also pubs where young people can go for cheap drinks and casual fun. Could he have taken a liking to one of the girls there?"

"Jack isn't interested in casual trysts like that."

For one, he was a love interest character. The only woman he'd ever fallen for was "Alice." That fact remained true no matter which character the player pursued in the game.

It's perfectly normal for otome gamers to complete the routes of every love interest in the game, even when you have one specific character you adore more than the rest. Such players definitely don't want to see that person in a relationship with another woman during other routes, which is why they're written to stay away from romances unless they're the character being romanced, out of consideration for the sentimental hearts of the player.

But that wasn't an explanation I could share with Inspector Dodo. If I told him I'd reincarnated into this world after being hit by a truck, I would come off as nothing less than insane.

The inspector took pity on me, whom he clearly saw as a naïve

little girl.

"I'm sure this must be hard for you, but you should know that servants never show their true selves around their master. What kind of servant is this 'Jack' of yours?"

"He takes great care of the family. He's a wonderful butler whose service is always impeccable."

"And yet, he appears to be a criminal. Do you have any proof that he was at home on the night of the murder?"

"No, I don't. But Jack has no desire to kill anyone."

The Liddell family business consisted of bestowing punishment on wrongdoers that the police and legal system couldn't otherwise touch.

The usual routine was to track down fugitives and execute them on the spot. Jack's life was already so drenched with blood, there was no need for him to start cutting down random victims as well.

These secretive activities of my family were impossible to use as proof of Jack's innocence, but aside from that, I was still a noblewoman. My place in society meant that my words would certainly be taken with more weight than those of a random commoner.

"This is my official statement as the head of the Liddell family. Be sure to take this down. Jack is not a murderer. As someone who's lived with him for many years, I know this to be true."

"I'm sorry to say that I can't put full stock in those words. Your family holds a barony, but it was the Duke of Sharondale himself who witnessed Jack at the scene of the crime."

"The witness was a duke?"

The Duke of Sharondale's family line was closely related to the royal family. As an investor in many industries, including some fledgling companies, he was an incredibly famous man who possessed both wealth and influence.

As the value of land decreased due to the Industrial Revolution and poor soil conditions, many families of the aristocracy had to dip into their savings to maintain the same standard of living. But I'd heard Dark praise the duke specifically for his choice of profitable business ventures.

But why was a duke in such a bad part of town like the East End in the first place?

As I sat there in thought, I heard Inspector Dodo flip open his

pocket watch.

"A young lady with an empty baron's title to her name can't be trusted to the same extent as a duke can, as I see it. The time is one fifty p.m., forty seconds past the minute. This ends my interrogation. Take care on your way home."

"No, I won't be going home."

I stayed exactly where I was seated. Inspector Dodo, who'd been in the process of leaving the room, cocked his head and questioned me further.

"Fifteen seconds lost. You still need something?"

"I wish to speak with Jack while he's in custody."

"I can't allow that. I forgot to inform you that Jack has been upgraded from a person of interest to a suspect, meaning he can only meet with his lawyer."

"He's what...?"

I remained frozen in shock as the inspector left the interrogation room. Once I managed to stagger out for myself, I found Dark waiting for me with his back against the wall.

"Are you all right, Alice? From what I managed to hear, I don't think he harmed you...but you look so pale. Don't tell me Inspector Dodo threatened you?"

"Jack's been labeled an official suspect. He said that a duke gave eyewitness testimony that incriminates Jack."

"That's a sudden development. I want to hear the full story, but this probably isn't the best location. Let's head to the lobby. Here, do you want to take my arm?"

"Yes..."

I wrapped my hand around Dark's outstretched arm. The two of us began to take slow steps forward.

"Inspector Dodo was handpicked by the main office to lead the investigation into this Jack the Ripper case," Dark said. "He's devoted to producing results with maximum efficiency at all times. I suppose that much is obvious, considering he made Jack a suspect based solely off a duke's testimony. Is it possible this duke is mistaken in who he saw?"

"The inspector told me that Jack had been witnessed near the scene of the crime on previous occasions as well. Jack himself admitted to being in the East End, so I don't believe it to be a case of mistaken identity. Inspector Dodo seems to believe that Jack was there to enjoy the nightlife..."

I felt my heart grow heavy the more I spoke.

I can't believe that Jack was hiding something from me.

In the original game I'd played, Jack is never once arrested for his connection to the Jack the Ripper case. As soon as he falls under suspicion, Jack and Alice flee together, living a life of ups and downs on the run, until they manage to identify the true culprit.

"They're going to convict Jack at this rate. I only just vowed to spend time together with my family, and now we're about to be separated again...!"

I thought back to my parents and all our servants who'd passed away. I was always the one who was left behind in the end. If this was truly my fate, I would have no choice but to live a life of hell on earth as I lost each member of my new family the more I—

"Listen to me, Alice."

"!"

Just as I was well on my way to plunging into the depths of despair, Dark grabbed my shoulders and shook me out of it.

"You're in a dangerous state right now. If a demon were to appear before your eyes, why, I bet you'd sell your soul for a chance at a beneficial contract. You won't be able to protect anyone like that, not as the head of your household, or as your own person. If you want to change the future, then start by sorting out what you already have in your possession. Or can't you remember?"

"What I already possess... A home to return to, a business to run, a family I love, and..."

I felt heat rise up in my chest when I stared into Dark's deep-blue eyes.

"...and a stigma. The one you branded me with when I became a stigmata."

"There you have it, my lady. You're the first young noblewoman who's ever taken a demon as an ally, and you'll probably be the last. But this game comes with rules. I know it's vexing to be beaten to the first move, but you've only lost a single piece just yet. You can still win if you come up with a long-term plan."

"That sounds a lot like chess. I would be the black pieces, of course."

The white side moved first in a game of chess. As the girl who was always clad in black herself, it started to feel natural to be one step behind the police.

"Thank you, Dark. I've composed myself. I believe in Jack's innocence. He wouldn't just murder a person in cold blood like that."

"I believe him too. I'd like to hear why the witness believed Jack to be the culprit. Were you able to get his family name?"

"It was none other than the Duke of Sharondale himself."

"I know the man," Dark replied, furrowing his brow. "Remember how I said I was interested in renting out a pleasure garden for our engagement party? The person I consulted with on this was the Duke of Sharondale. He owns a very large garden in Chelsea."

"I see."

I had listened halfheartedly to his plans for this party before, as I was still hesitant to continue my engagement to him in the first place, but I never imagined it would have any link to a case like the one before us now.

Somehow, I couldn't help but feel that everything was going to come back to "Alice" and her fate.

"If you want to meet with him, I could send a message right away."

"Yes, please do."

Thanks to Dark's proactive nature, I had already found the first step that I could take—meeting the duke who witnessed Jack in the East End.



AS it turned out, our plans to meet the Duke of Sharondale came to fruition the day after Jack's arrest.

"This will be my first time meeting His Grace. I hope I don't look too strange today."

I was wearing a black dress and bustle with red roses embroidered on the fabric. Only after we arrived in the duke's parlor did I begin to fret about my choice of outfit.

I was never this nervous when I had an audience with the Queen herself, although that was in part due to her cheery personality. But nobility was strict on the subject of manners and etiquette. The slightest misstep made from carelessness could cause ripples in one's social life, so I had to be constantly on alert.

“Your dress is of the finest quality. Although, I’d say it could do with a few more accessories, in my opinion.”

So said Dark, the most eccentric of dressers.

He crossed his long legs on the sofa where he was seated. Dark was still wearing his hat—decorated with French lace today—as if this were his own home to lounge around in. I envied a man thickheaded enough to pay no mind to the lavish room we found ourselves in, including all the grand furniture that looked to be straight out of the reign of Louis XIV.

Well, it’s hardly a surprise anymore. He’s been a member of high society longer than I have, so he knows how to interact with those of higher rank than himself

I was the head of a baron’s family, and Dark’s nonchalant attitude was something I needed to absorb for myself. I hoped to master the art of conversation and negotiations so I could form beneficial relationships, not to mention the judgment to decide on what monetary endeavors to pursue.

I really should have worked in business in my past life!

As much as I resented my lack of experience, I’d already reincarnated, and this realization was coming far too late. I started to look around the room for a mirror, hoping I could adjust my hairpiece to perfection, at the very least.

Most rooms meant for hosting guests were furnished with a large mirror placed on one of the walls.

This was a way of making the room look more spacious by means of optical illusion. Human brains are fundamentally simple, and by seeing their room reflected in a mirror, they subconsciously see it as a continuation of the very same room.

It was then that I managed to spot an unnaturally short curtain hung on the wall above the mantel, and I quickly stood up to grab it. Just as I was on the verge of lifting it up, a deep tone sounded in the room, ringing in the pit of my stomach.

“Is something troubling you with the cloth?”

The voice came from none other than the Duke of Sharondale himself. I pulled my hand back from the curtain, turned to face the duke, and bowed deeply where I stood.

“I was simply taken with this beautiful fabric. Please forgive my curiosity. I am Alice of the Liddell family.”

“I’m the Duke of Sharondale. I’m so pleased to meet the young family head I’ve heard about from all the rumors. Please, raise your

head. I must congratulate you on your engagement to Knightley here.”

The duke chuckled to himself. I took in the striking sight of the man’s billowing blond hair. In a word, he was handsome. Even the distinct smile lines on his face made him look like an aged movie star.

“Allow me to introduce my wife, Susie, the Duchess of Sharondale.”

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Liddell.”

Duchess Sharondale, whom the duke pulled closer by her slender waist, was a beautiful woman with a calming aura.

She wore her flaxen hair pulled up in a bun, and she was dressed in a loose postpartum dress with a doily shawl around the shoulders.

The duchess was carrying a bundle wrapped in a flower-patterned blanket. I couldn’t see what was inside, but I assumed it was her baby.

“I’m so happy we get to meet. Congratulations on your engagement, Lord Knightley. I apologize for bringing the baby along, but I was just too eager to wish you well, and so I followed my husband straight here.”

“It’s an honor to be congratulated by you both. Don’t you agree, Alice?”

“Yes, you have my sincerest thanks...!”

I gritted my teeth and swallowed the real words I wanted to say.

“I’m only engaged to him because I had no other choice!” It would have been satisfying to reveal that, but such an admission would ruin the pretext of the engagement party that we’d come here to discuss.

The duke sat down in an armchair near Dark.

“Let’s get down to business. My pleasure garden out in Chelsea is most special. It’s shrouded in nature, but you can still enjoy a show or a picnic there. We even host events like hot air balloon rides and fireworks. I can work something out for you if you have any requests. Tell me what details you have in mind so far, won’t you?”

“We’re looking to host an easygoing party for all of our acquaintances. I’d like it to be in the afternoon.”

“Hot air balloons would be perfect for that. I’d also suggest

scattering flower petals from the sky, since it gives the party a nice celebratory mood. It's summer, so I can get all kinds of colorful flowers for you."

"In that case, might I request roses? They're her favorite flower."

Forget all that, Dark! Start asking about Jack!

As I fidgeted restlessly at his side, Duchess Sharondale, who'd taken a seat on a nearby stool, began to chat with me.

"Tell me, Miss Liddell. Have you decided on a dress for your engagement party yet? Most brides-to-be wear white, but you can pick any color of your choosing. White is for your wedding, after all. I think a blue dress in the color of Lord Knightley's eyes would be just perfect."

"I'll be certain to keep that in mind. Is your private salon still available, Your Grace? I've had the opportunity to visit for tea with some of the young ladies—"

"Wait just a moment. All this talking will leave me parched. Bring us some tea and snacks at once."

At the duchess's order, the stone-faced kitchen maid came forward to pour us cups of tea.

The hostess would usually be the one to serve her guest, but the arrangement seemed to be different in the Sharondale home. I imagined this was because the duchess was busy cradling a baby.

As Duchess Sharondale questioned me on my tea preferences, Dark and the duke pressed forward in their conversation.

"I've remained in London to be closer to my dear fiancée, but I'm surprised to see you've stayed behind too, Your Grace. I imagined you'd be eager to return home and enjoy the hunting season on your estate."

"It was just bad timing. I had a work matter come up..."

Duke Sharondale slumped back against his chair.

"I'm currently working on getting a sightseeing boat operating on the river Thames. Negotiations with the ferryman are rough, but I'm sure it will all work out. How's business going on your end?"

"Quite well, thank you. But I can't bring myself to branch out into large ships and those hefty maintenance costs they incur, like what you do."

"That shows you're a careful man. If you ever feel like getting into this line of work, I know an insurance man who could help make things happen for you. I happen to have lots of friends down

at Lloyd's.

"Speaking of insurance, now that I'm getting married, I've been thinking of purchasing life insurance. London's just not as safe as it used to be. Did you hear about the Jack the Ripper case?"

There you go!

I gripped the fabric of my skirt. The whole reason we were here was to confirm the duke's statement about seeing Jack near the scene of the murder.

It also appeared that Duke Sharondale was eager to discuss the subject too.

"It's already resolved, isn't it? To tell you the truth, I was the one who witnessed the main suspect, in fact. I saw a young man emerge from an alleyway, his clothes all disheveled, and just knew he had to be up to something. I found the victim there when I went to investigate the alley. I called for the police right away, described the man I saw to Inspector Dodo, and learned that he was arrested almost immediately. The young man was named Jack, just like the name left at the crime scene."

"It sounds like you handled it perfectly. Inspector Dodo's quick identification of the suspect is most impressive as well. There's as many Jacks here in London as there are stars in the sky."

"I told the inspector that the culprit had an injured hand too, since I saw that his hand was bandaged."

"How strange."

Dark remained still as he began to press the duke as a detective would. He calmly interlaced his fingers.

"The crime took place in an unlit alleyway, on a cloudy night without any illumination from the moon. You must have incredible eyesight, Your Grace, to discern the man's clothes and bandaged hand."

Shocked, I turned to glance at the two men, where I saw a look of challenge in Duke Sharondale's eyes.

"...I had a lantern of my own in hand that night, when I happened to catch sight of the culprit as we passed by each other. Anyway, what a beautiful fiancée you've found for yourself. That red hair of hers is even more striking than the rumors give it credit for. Some young folks dye their hair different colors, but it's no comparison to a natural shade like that."

The duke had blatantly changed the subject. He didn't want to be questioned on this matter any further.

How suspicious. I wonder if he's lying...

"Here you are, Miss Liddell."

"Th-Thank you."

The maid thrust a teacup out toward me. She'd interrupted the conversation, but Duchess Sharondale was too busy comforting her baby to notice.

"Your Grace, when exactly did you have your chi— *Mm?*"

A tickle in my nose caused my sentence to abruptly stop. I looked down at the table, overcome by a powerful smell, and saw that a serving tray of freshly baked muffins had just had its lid removed.

Warm steam carried the scent of black pepper up to my face. Most treats and desserts in Great Britain made use of spices, but this was much more than I was used to.

"Achoo!"

A loud sneeze escaped me. This was unthinkable for a young noblewoman in the company of others, but I was powerless in the face of such an overwhelming smell.

I pressed a handkerchief to my reddened nose.

"Bardon be."

"That's perfectly all right, dear. My husband adores black pepper, so our chefs use a lot of it in their cooking. Hurry and retrieve the other treats."

At the duchess's order, the maid switched out the plate for a circular arrangement of cookies atop a tray. However, black pepper was still visible on the surface of these treats too. With nowhere to run from the overpowering enemy, I let out sneeze after sneeze.

"Achoo! Achoo! Achooooo!"

"My fiancée seems to find the air here disagreeable. What say we take our leave, Alice?"

Dark stood up when he saw my teary eyes. He led me away from the duchess before she could escort me to the door, then smiled brightly at Duke Sharondale.

"Your Grace. I'd love to hear more about this Jack the Ripper some other time."

"You're always welcome here. Next time, maybe bring a mouth scarf along with you so that we can talk a bit longer."

The duke's face seemed to be suggesting something to Dark, but I was too busy desperately trying to keep my sneezes in to ponder what it could be.

Once Dark led me out and into the carriage, I finally had a chance to blow my nose as loud as I wanted.

“Fffft! Ah, my nose really tickled. They use way too much pepper here!”

“It must come from the customs of older times. Nobles used to slaughter a single animal once every week, and as the odor worsened over time, a bounty of fine spices was used to cover the stench. Although, I’ve never exactly been served black pepper desserts at a duke’s home before...”

“Spice can be addictive. The duke must have really taken a liking to it.”

I remembered how some people in my past life went crazy for spicy foods. Spice, to a certain extent, is more about experiencing the pain of it than the flavor, although some people begin to build up a tolerance to that sensation. Those poor souls seek spicier and spicier foods to reach the same level of stimulation, eventually reaching the point where they have to eat meals filled with dangerous ingredients like habanero chilis and ghost peppers.

“The duchess and her baby weren’t sneezing, so they’re probably used to that amount of pepper on a daily basis in the duke’s home.”

Black pepper was just another variety of spice. I knew it must be a very intense scent to a newborn, but the baby never made so much as a peep. Perhaps its mother was particularly skilled in soothing her child.

Judging by the size of the bundle in her arms, I imagined the baby to be about three months old. It would be sleeping somewhere between fifteen to seventeen hours a day at that age, so it wasn’t strange that the child was taking a nap during our visit.

“Something struck me as odd during my conversation with the duke. Did that guard dog of yours injure his hand?”

Dark’s question drew my thoughts back to the morning of Jack’s arrest.

“His nondominant hand was bandaged. I don’t remember him injuring himself before that day, though.”

“If he hurt himself in the East End on the night of the murder, then the duke couldn’t have witnessed him in a dark alleyway. It had to be somewhere brighter.”

“But why would he lie?”

“Perhaps he’s protecting the true culprit. It would make it

easier for us if the duke simply confessed his reason for being in the East End, but I'm sure that will never happen. Let's take the proper time to look into it."

As we conversed, the carriage finally reached the small path leading to the hill where the Liddell estate was located.

From the other side of the cast-iron gates, I saw an unseasonal cloudy haze surrounding the rose-and-ivy-covered walls of the manor. Something wasn't right. When I looked closer, I saw that the haze was billowing up from behind the building.

"A fire!"

I leaped out of the carriage once it reached the entrance and rushed to the back of the house.

Once I made it through the rose-shrouded garden and raced past the fountain, I approached the stairs that led to the kitchen. The smoke was coming from a vent near the staircase. I could tell there was a fire on the other side.

This was a choice you could make during the Jack the Ripper case in the game! It's a death flag!

In one of the routes I played in my past life, it was the townsfolk who tossed a petrol bomb into the Liddell home after learning that Jack was suspected to be the culprit. If the player made the wrong choice, "Alice" would meet her end among the billowing smoke.

This was, of course, a one-way trip to a bad end.

"Dum and Dee are still in the house. We have to put the fire out!"

Just as I was about to race down the stairs, Dark reached out and grabbed my arm.

"You don't want to inhale this smoke. Get close to the ground and hide behind me."

He retrieved a handkerchief from his pocket and used it to cover my mouth. The two of us descended the stairs together. When we reached the door, Dark used his cane to prop it open, fearing the heat of a fire on the other side. A plume of white smoke surged from the kitchen, passing by us, and funneling up the stairs.

I got on my hands and knees to crawl into the kitchen, sweeping it with my eyes to find the source of the smoke.

What exactly caught on fire?

It was then that I noticed yellow sparks scattering over the hazy countertop. It was some sort of gunpowder that was burning.

Suddenly sensing someone close by, I yanked my pistol out of my pochette and aimed it at the room.

“Stop right there. What do you think you’re doing?!”

As I squinted at the outline of the person, I felt arms wrap around me from both sides.

“Don’t shoot, Alice!”

“Don’t shoot, Alice!”

“Dum?! Dee?!”

The boys’ blond hair bobbed atop their heads. The pair were wearing children’s aprons, and I could see that their cheeks were dirtied with soot.

“Thank goodness I found you. Hurry up and go outside where it’s safe. Keep a cloth to your noses and mouths and be sure to stay close to the floor!”

“What’s this...?”

As I instructed the twins to evacuate, Dark, at my side, seemed to have noticed something when he opened up the nearby ventilation shaft. Once he did so, the smoke quickly cleared from the room.

The person standing near the counter wasn’t an arsonist—it was a boy dressed in Arabian-style clothes.

“Mr. Hisui?”

Hisui wore the same apron as the twins. He was clutching a bundle of lit matches that burned together like a torch. On the counter nearby was a bowl of water with more bundles of used-up matches stuck inside it, which produced a large amount of white smoke as they smoldered.

“So it wasn’t a fire...”

I slumped over in relief, while Dark, on the other hand, scowled and placed his hands on his hips.

“Hisui, what are you doing here?”

“I made pie. Today’s special snack.”

“Pies are supposed to be baked in an oven. It’s dangerous *and* inefficient to bake them with matches. Didn’t I tell you not to play with fire when I’m not around?”

“I know. But this is not play.” Hisui crossed his arms like an arrogant chef. “It is serious business.”

“I don’t care how serious the business is. What if the house had caught fire? You’re never to cook with matches again. Understood?”

“Okaaay,” he responded spiritedly.

I turned to look the twins in the eyes.

"There's no need for you to bake a cake or anything like that."

"But Jack isn't here right now."

"But we found the recipe and everything."

It hit me that the twins simply wanted to be of help. I wrapped my arms around the two of them and squeezed them tight.

"I really appreciate the thoughtfulness. But Jack would be so sad if either of you burned yourselves. Why don't you leave all the cooking to me and Leeds, okay?"

When they heard my request, the boys exchanged glances and nodded.

I turned my attention to the countertop, ready to lighten the mood. A cloudlike lump of white meringue was piled on top of the pie crust in its pan.

Hisui and the twins had been working on a lemon meringue pie.

This dessert is typically made with condensed lemon curds spread atop a crisp pie crust, topped with a fluffy layer of meringue, and baked in the oven until the meringue begins to brown.

But the boys' attempt to cook the pie with matches left most of the dessert entirely raw. The meringue was visibly drooping, and the pie crust had collapsed in places from the heat.

"We should probably just start from scratch."

"I'd be happy to assist."

As I began to prepare the ingredients, Dark looked at the recipe book next to me.

"These recipes look well used. Are they passed down through the Liddell family?"

"Uncle Bear left them behind. They're how Jack studied cooking."

Jack had decided to get serious about his culinary skills after the resolution of the Sleeping Beauty cases. It was thanks to those recipes that he was able to cook many of the same intricate dishes that Uncle Bear always made for us. For Jack, following those same recipes with his own two hands was a way of coming to terms with the past.

"Uncle Bear's cooking was a staple of this household... That's why I believe Jack was trying to overcome the past by cooking those same recipes."

"Does he make all the meals for the Liddell family?"

“Yes, he does.”

“Well, that will make things difficult until he’s back at home. Would you like me to send over one of my own chefs?”

“No thank you. Leeds and I will be fine on our own.”

The Liddell manor was rigged with many traps to protect against intruders.

They were even placed in rooms that a servant would use, like the kitchen, laundry room, and closet. Any normal servant would certainly lose their life before they managed to memorize the complex layout of the traps.

“Even I can make things like simple soups, and bread is easily bought from a bakery. Our desserts will be a bit more modest than usual, but we’ll bear it just fine until Jack returns.”

“Then why don’t you let my chefs cook your main courses for dinner and have Hisui deliver them in the evenings? We can’t let the poor Tweedles waste away now.”

It was a helpful offer, so I decided to accept.

Neither Leeds nor I was a picky eater, but the twins despised anything with beans. As I conveyed this information to Dark, I saw Leeds appear from around the corner.

“I was wondering where everyone was. What are you up to now? Preparing a tea party together? How sweet.”

He wore a thin cardigan over his shirt—a lightweight outfit perfect for the hot summer months. In addition to the usual gaudy pink scarf around his neck, I spotted a stack of books in his hands.

“Where have you been, Leeds?”

“I was at Mudie’s to find out what books Jack has been borrowing there. Here, these are the most recent ones.”

On the countertop, Leeds laid out a book about table manners, a collection of recipes, and an illustrated reference book on gemstones.

“I understand why Jack would want to study manners and recipes, but why on earth was he researching jewels? Leeds, you could have taught him anything he wanted to know about jewelry and accessories.”

“Oh, so you think Jack couldn’t trust my expert knowledge, hmm? Your tongue is as sharp as ever. That’s it. Why don’t I drink up all your favorite tea and see how you like it!”

As Leeds stormed off to the tea storage, I noticed something stuck to the back of his shirt.

“Wait, Leeds. There’s a letter on your back.”

When he heard that, Leeds began to crane his neck around, clearly embarrassed.

“Good grief! When did that get there? I had no idea!”

He peeled the envelope off, and I saw that it was sealed with wax in the shape of a lion-and-unicorn-adorned shield. This seal was only used by a single person within the kingdom of Great Britain.

“It’s from Queen Victoria.”

I opened the envelope, pulled out the letter, and felt my heart skip a beat when I saw what was inside.

Her Majesty’s letters were typically lengthy and began with things like recent gossip. But the content of today’s letter contained a single sentence.

May the traitor meet his maker.

“Even Her Majesty thinks our Jack is Jack the Ripper.”

Given that we were the family that executed violent criminals to preserve the peace of the kingdom, it would be a serious affair for there to be a murderer in our midst. Our family’s reputation could be somewhat preserved only if we disposed of Jack, the traitor, and muddled the details of the case to the public.

Her Majesty likely believed that I needed coaxing in the form of this letter to execute Jack. She had a cheery and playful exterior, but beneath that, she was a ruthless politician who believed in an eye for an eye.

While the royal family governed the kingdom on the surface, the Liddells had always worked with them to govern from the shadows. However, now that our family was headed by “Alice”—still a young girl herself—that delicate balance was in danger of being tipped.

I knew that the Queen wouldn’t hesitate to cut all ties with my family if one of us ever abused our role and committed crimes for our own personal gain. Not that we would ever do such a thing, of course.

I really underestimated Her Majesty.

I placed the queen’s letter in the bowl full of matches.

The ink of her words bled into the crisp white parchment as the water soaked in.

“I don’t need her instructions. The Liddells aren’t Queen Victoria’s pawns. I’m the only one who gets to control my family.”

Our role wasn't to be subservient to the queen. I—Alice—would never give in to such threats. My family would continue our work of punishing those who meant harm to the kingdom, even if we had to defy the royal family itself. It was the very reason we'd always operated alone, without the help of the military or other outside personnel.

“Winning over Her Majesty's favor is the last thing we need to focus on right now. We'll conduct our own investigation, identify the true culprit, and punish him for stealing Jack from us.”

I held out my hands toward Leeds and the twins.

“I'll be needing all of your help. What do you say?”

“Of course, our dear Alice.”

“Of course, our dear Alice.”

“Losing a member of the family has been an utter nightmare. I'll do whatever is needed of me while Jack's not around.”

The twins linked with my thumb and pinkie finger, while Leeds placed his hand on top of mine. Jack would usually place his hand at the very top. Though it didn't feel complete without him, this wasn't the time to be caught up in my sadness.

I looked at Leeds, then at the twins. On the count of three, they pushed my hand down with theirs.

“Anything for Alice!”

With this, my family was now prepared.

Dark watched over our circular cheer, remarking to Hisui how he wished he could join us.

“Good luck with that” was Hisui's simple response.



AN exotic aroma tickled my nose as I stood inside the cramped changing room. The lantern hanging above me was dirtied with soot, making for an entirely unsatisfactory lighting experience.

“Miss Alice, are you sure this is what you want to do?”

Leeds called out to me from the other side of the curtain. Stripped down to my petticoat, I whispered back to him.

“Yes. We have to gather information about the case.”

The dress laid out for me had sleeves puffed out like balloons. Its skirt was long, tiered, and frilly, but the frayed seams were

telling of its age and wear. The bright mauve color, obtained with the very first invention of aniline dyes, was a popular style about twenty years earlier. Gloves, shawls, and even soaps used to be given the same color.

The two of us had come to Camden Market—a shopping district along Regent’s Canal that was a hub for warehouses and factories. It was also a common place to shop for used clothes and secondhand goods.

Most shoppers in Camden Market were laborers, as it was a place to easily purchase almost all household necessities for cheap. The popularity of secondhand clothing meant that an out-of-style dress was the correct choice if I wanted to remain inconspicuous.

I opened the curtain, now dressed in an outfit entirely of used clothing, and let Leeds get a look at me.

“What do you think? Do I look like a Whitechapel girl?”

“Well... Worn-out old clothes aren’t enough to hide your elegance, my lady. We’re going to need to do some accessorizing...”

Leeds turned to scour the shelves for hats and purses with a look of utmost sincerity on his face.

“Tiered skirts used to be very popular. They were usually worn with small hats, but that would just make you look like you’re wearing a costume in a historical play, so let’s be bold and go with something that doesn’t match. How about a cotton fichu pinned with a broach, and a drawstring reticule to carry around, oh, and yes, with a bonnet covering most of your hair...”

As I put on more of his chosen accessories, my anachronistic yet adorable outfit became complete. Leeds gave an amused chuckle as he watched me twirl in front of the mirror.

“I know just the name for this look. This is the ‘romantic nostalgic style.’ Oh, just look at you, my lady! You’d charm anyone who laid an eye on you!”

“But this is supposed to be a disguise to keep me from standing out...” When I stuck my head out of the curtain to remind Leeds of this, a female employee of the shop called out to me.

“It looks lovely on you, miss!”

The staff was extra attentive and interactive with customers as a means of preventing shoplifting.

Considering why we were out on the town today, I figured it was best to leave sooner rather than later, so Leeds and I paid for the clothes and rushed out of the store.

"I hope that woman doesn't remember us..."

"What difference does it make? It's not like we're off on our merry way to go murder someone."

Leeds, at my side, was wearing formfitting trousers that emphasized his slender figure. A large jacket rested on his shoulders and billowed out behind him in the breeze with each strutted step, much like a model.

The young mill worker girls cried out in excitement whenever they passed Leeds and caught sight of his androgynous beauty. "Was that a man?" "Maybe a woman?" "Who cares. They were so cool!" Their praise for him made me smile.

That's why, in my past life, people used to just say that his gender was simply "Leeds."

Leeds led me not like a man escorting a young lady, but as if we were two friends out for a casual stroll on the town. I felt my nerves ease up every time he spoke to make small talk.

But the pleasant atmosphere ended once our bus arrived in Whitechapel.

"*Urk...* Something smells strange."

The stench of uncleaned gutters wafted up from the street around us.

As I wrinkled my nose, Leeds, who looked unfazed, began to explain the source of the smell.

"This is the area of London where you'll find tanneries and slaughterhouses. We buy the stuff that's already processed, but the people here are the ones who take care of the parts we don't want to see and smell on our streets. They deserve our gratitude for their job."

Leeds took my hand and led me behind a small chapel.

We turned two corners and arrived in a back alleyway. The sight I was met with filled me with dread.

"This is where Jack the Ripper left his note."

Words were scrawled out on the old stone walls with black ink.

I've taken a life for the sake of love. Jack the Ripper.

"Tell me, my lady. Is this Jack's handwriting?"

"Hmm... It's similar, but also different in some ways... His handwriting isn't great, but it's not as sloppy as this either..."

All servants of the Liddell family received a certain level of education. Jack, therefore, could read and write, but his

handwriting always had a strange exertion in its execution. The letters came out looking shaky—not exactly peak penmanship by any standards.

“Writing on a wall is nothing like writing on parchment. It’s hard to tell like this.”

“True... I guess that’s that then, hmm? If only Jack’s handwriting weren’t so unsightly.”

As Leeds slumped his shoulders, a policeman at the crime scene caught sight of us.

“You there! This is no place for you to gawk. A person lost their life here.”

The officer who called out to us looked familiar to me, so I lowered my face, allowing it to be covered by my bonnet. He was a young man with poor posture—the policeman who’d been interrogated by Dark in the previous case we investigated.

Seeing that I’d fallen silent, Leeds began to question the officer.

“Is that the message the criminal left behind?”

“It is. The first policeman who found it thought it was some child’s attempt at a prank. Now that a suspect has been arrested, we’re planning on cleaning it up soon, but this graffiti isn’t like any kind we’ve seen before. I’m not certain it will come off at all...”

“Excuse me. What exactly is different about it?”

The question came out of me before I could stop myself.

In the game routes I played in my past life, the culprit was always a man who worked in the meatpacking industry. He kills his wife and leaves behind the message in white chalk in order to make the murder look like the work of a random attacker. Although, the message being written in ink instead of chalk didn’t seem like a problem that some water and a brush couldn’t solve...

When the officer heard my question, his face stiffened grimly. He looked as if he were about to tell a ghost story around a campfire.

“Those words? They were written with blood. It only looks black because the culprit mixed the blood from two different people together, causing an agglutination reaction. ...Ah, this isn’t the kind of thing that passersby need to hear about. Do forgive me.”

His apology was a bit too late at that point. I looked up at the wall and felt the blood drain from my face.

The message was written over such a large space on the wall—

even wider than I was tall, and all of it was done with the blood of two people or more.

But there was only one victim. Whose blood did he mix it with?

The image of Jack's bandaged hand flashed in my mind. I felt my head begin to pulse with pain.

Leeds seemed to have reached the same conclusion. He openly pressed the policeman for more information.

"But I read in the newspaper that there was only a single victim. Was that report mistaken?"

"Inspector Dodo, the head of our investigation, has it in his mind that the culprit must have been injured during the attack, leading to the message being mixed with his own blood. That's one of the reasons why he arrested a young man by the name of Jack. But a simple cut on the hand isn't enough to produce the amount of blood needed for something like this in the first place. Well, I guess it's no difference, since we can't prove otherwise until we find a second victim."

This officer didn't seem to believe that the Jack who'd been arrested was the true killer after all. It was a relief to hear that not all of the police were in lockstep. Just then, I heard a commotion from nearby.

The officer before us recoiled with a look of distaste.

"Speak of the devil. There's the inspector now."

Inspector Dodo was waddling his way toward us from the main street, with his neck craned forward awkwardly like a bird.

"You there, onlookers. Has something caught your attention?"

Oh no!

I quickly spun around to face the opposite direction. Despite my disguise, there was no doubt in mind that he'd easily recognize my face as belonging to the girl he'd interviewed once already for this case.

"Heavens me, Mr. Detective. We're only here to see what all the fuss is—"

Before Leeds could finish with his excuse, a man appeared before us, sticking his cane between Leeds and the inspector.

"Greetings, Inspector Dodo."

It was Dark who'd arrived to bring an end to our conversation. He wore a three-piece suit that was entirely white—perhaps in honor of his visit to Whitechapel—and a large hat complete with bells that formed an oceanic scene.

Inspector Dodo's gaze was brimming with suspicion at the arrival of the eccentrically dressed nobleman.

"Well, if it isn't Lord Knightley. It's nice to finally meet the man I've heard so many rumors of. You're the overly curious earl who sticks his nose into all kinds of cases throughout London. Do I have that right? I take it you're interested in Jack the Ripper now too."

"You are correct. I'm impressed that you feel the need to come all the way down to the crime scene personally, Inspector. The talk among the ton is that you're a pillar of the police department."

Dark wrapped his free hand around his back and pointed off to the rear of the alleyway. I followed along with my eyes and spotted Hisui peeking out from behind a pile of garbage.

He wanted us to make our escape. Leeds and I quickly exchanged glances before heading off down the alley in the opposite direction.

"You are all right?"

"We are, thanks to you and Dark. May I ask what's with that outfit?"

Hisui was dressed in a butler's outfit today. But that wasn't all. He wore his necktie loose and his jacket wrapped around his waist in a very uncouth manner.

"I am being Jack. His Lordship said, 'Go to the pub like this.'"

With that, the three of us headed toward the pub, which we managed to find with relative ease. Pubs were places where one could go in the afternoon for light meals, which we saw listed on a sign placed outside the building on the street. Once we entered, we ordered food at the counter—which was a simple plank set atop a few beer barrels—paid for our meals, and took a seat at a table near the wall.

The pub chairs were made entirely with wood. Since they hadn't placed cushions on the seats, I imagined they must be painful to sit in for too long. But no one else seemed to mind particularly. I looked out at the many customers with tankards of beer in their hands, grinning and laughing rowdily with each other.

"I've never been to a pub before. They don't have any menus, and you have to pay before you eat."

"That's because they always serve the exact same foods and drinks. They don't need menus, since most long-time customers can just order their 'usual.'"

I took in Leeds's extensive knowledge until our food arrived at the table. The keeper of the pub, an old woman, delivered us fish and chips, lamb roast, and Yorkshire pudding. I tipped the woman generously, which delighted her until she cast a glance over at Hisui.

"Kids these days wear their clothes so strange. We just had a young chap working here recently who dressed like a butler, but he never wore the uniform like it's supposed to be. I chided him about it and everything, but I guess he didn't care to fix it."

"Did this boy happen to have black hair? About his height?"

Hisui stood up and turned around to demonstrate.

"Yes, that's right," she agreed. "He looked to have the same body type too. The bloke didn't want us to know much about him, so I just called him Jack and left it at that. But after payday, he up and vanished. Oh, right, he broke a plate and hurt his hand on that last day, and then there was the murder nearby too. I suppose it was as good a time as any to leave. Tell me, have you three young'uns heard about that Jack the Ripper yet?"

"We have. We just saw the message he left at the crime scene, in fact."

"Dreadful stuff, isn't it? But it's bringing in all sorts of people who want to catch a glimpse of it. Business here is better than ever!"

With that, she left our table, and Hisui began to dig into his lamb roast.

Leeds and I focused more on the information from the old woman than our food.

"So Jack was coming to the East End to save up money by working at this pub. Was I not paying him enough for living expenses?"

"That can't be. He told me he was building up savings with his salary. What got into that boy, sneaking out of the house in the middle of the night to work at a pub?"

We finished our meals and exited the pub. As we made our way down the street, heading in the direction of the main street where the buses stopped, I suddenly noticed the name *Sharondale* printed on one of the roadside buildings.

Looking up, I saw that we were standing outside the brownstone walls of a trendy-looking jewelry store.

Leeds realized I'd come to a stop. He joined me in staring at

the building.

“Miss Alice? Is there something about this place?”

“Yes. The Duke of Sharondale... The duke is the one who witnessed Jack at the scene of the crime. This must be a shop he owns.”

“Oh really? Let’s take a peek, shall we?”

Leeds escorted me inside.

Glass cases were set up around the shop, filled with accessories made from gems no larger than my fingernails. The prices were relatively low as well. I knew this store must have catered to working-class patrons.

“These must look like children’s playthings in comparison to the jewelry you own, don’t you think, my lady? But the working class has to pinch every last penny to afford things like these. They may be cheap, but the effort put into buying them is an act of love in itself. Look, these are exactly what I mean.”

Leeds pointed at a group of rings. Each one was inlaid with a row of gems such as rubies, sapphires, diamonds, emeralds, and even more. These were called acrostic rings. It was a way of conveying a message to the recipient of the ring by using the first letter of each gem to spell out a message.

We had things like acrostic poems in my past life, but in the Victorian era, rings were a popular form of it. Even in the story *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*—the namesake of *Evil Alice’s* heroine—there was an acrostic poem that spelled out the name *Alice* when read vertically. Perhaps that was what had started the current trend.

One of the rings on display was decorated with a ruby, emerald, garnet, amethyst, another ruby, and a diamond. The first letters of the gems spelled out the word *regard*.

“Such lovely little things. If someone bought one of these for me, goodness, they’d steal my heart on the spot.”



Leeds's eyes sparkled as if he were in a trance. A saleswoman with her hair pulled back piped up to ask if we needed any help. This was a perfect opportunity for me to question her.

"Is this shop owned by the Duke of Sharondale?"

"Yes, miss. His Grace uses his personal connections to import the finest of gems from around the world. The largest stones are sent to luxury jewelers in the wealthier areas, and we sell anything that's left. It helps keep the prices down too. Oh!"

She looked outside the window and spotted Hisui wearing his butler's uniform.

"I've had a customer wearing a messy uniform just like that one. He ordered an acrostic ring for a proposal and came to pick it up just the other day. He was quite insistent that I open the shop in the middle of the night just for him to collect his ring."

"Did the man have a bandage around his hand?"

The saleswoman smiled pleasantly in response to my fearful words.

"Why yes, he did. He told me he'd accidentally broken a plate and injured himself. So you know this man?"

"...No, I don't."

With that, I left the counter.

Now I knew why Jack was secretly working in the East End. He was trying to buy a ring for a marriage proposal.

He'd checked out the reference book on gems from the library to create an acrostic ring with a proper message. That was the reason for his secret outings and his refusal to pay with the salary I gave him.

Jack had someone in his life who meant more to him than "Alice."

My ultimate bias is in love. It feels like my heart's been smashed to bits...

The sheer shock I felt was disrupting my vision. My legs felt weightless as I staggered out of the shop and onto the street. A worried Hisui helped prop me back up.

"Miss Alice, you are very pale. Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not right at all..."

I placed my hands against my stomach, which was now full with Yorkshire pudding.

One thought filled my mind—I wished I could lay in my bed

and escape into the world of an otome game, if only for the briefest moment.

Chapter 3: A Midday Garden Waltz

WATER cascaded over the surface of jagged rocks. It landed inside a fountain basin, glimmering in the light as its mist filled the air, bringing relief from the harsh summer heat.

How refreshing...

I took a deep breath and allowed the cool, pleasant air to fill my lungs. Despite the black parasol in my hands, the dark color of my dress had been keeping my body temperature uncomfortably high.

A jungle of plants imported from southern continents, with their eye-catchingly bright flowers, stood planted around the waterfall. I looked up at the sky to see a small hot air balloon off in the distance. The occupants were scattering flower petals from above. I could imagine that some kind of celebration was playing out on the ground.

“Pleasure gardens sure are vast...”

I was currently paying a visit to the Sharondale Garden. It was quite large and required a paid ticket to enter, and as the name suggested, it was owned by the Duke of Sharondale himself.

As for why I was there that day, I had been dragged along for an inspection of Dark’s engagement party venue. He was eager to make full use of his money and connections to put on his “dream engagement reveal,” as he phrased it.

But the party was also an important way for Dark to introduce me to fellow noble families and his other influential acquaintances. A certain amount of extravagance was expected when entertaining the upper classes, and I understood why he wanted to host the party in something like a pleasure garden. However...

“This place is simply too large, is it not?”

The Sharondale Garden was about five hundred times larger than I ever imagined. When I heard that it was to be the venue of an engagement party, I thought it would be like a restaurant with outdoor seating. But that utter lack of imagination made me want to slap myself now.

In addition to the area full of plant life where I was at the moment, there were restaurants and café stands for light dining, a performance area with arches and a circular stage, and even a small replica castle for events.

Every last tree, flower, building, and waterfall here had been nonexistent until the establishment of the garden. Some were brought in from different corners of the globe, while others were man-made creations. The garden was built to be a place of Edenic respite for all the Londoners who'd grown fatigued of city life.

It was said that fifty years ago, there were more than sixty pleasure gardens in existence, and yet attendance began to wane due to things like lack of upkeep or even accidents. Certain ruffians took this opportunity to move into the gardens, and one by one, the venues started to close down. Sharondale Garden was the only remaining pleasure garden of good standing left in London.

"Duke Sharondale's put in the work to make this place a popular spot. The staff are friendly, the grounds are kept tidy, and there are patrolmen stationed about to keep guests safe. This venue would make for an unforgettable memory if we were to hold our engagement party here. If only I had more than ten people to invite...!"

Alice's official backstory made it very clear that "Rabbit" was her only friend.

I'd never been one to be blessed with female friends in life. Ever since I made my debut into high society, though I had plenty of opportunities to converse with other young ladies, it never came without a lot of harassment. I still had yet to determine how, exactly, to make friends.

In my past life, we had services that would hire people to show up at weddings for people who don't have any friends. Not that such a thing exists in Victorian London.

I was at risk of embarrassing myself on a major scale. Not to mention, I wasn't particularly in the right mental state for a party anyway. Jack had been made a suspect in a murder, and now that I knew he'd developed feelings for someone after our East End investigation, my heart felt like nothing more than a well-used punching bag.

Dark was the one who'd basically dragged me here, though I wasn't sure how aware he was of my feelings. Regardless, he was now staring at the plunge pool with great interest.

“It’s as if we’ve been transported straight into the southern hemisphere. Imagine if they placed tea stands here that sold tropical drinks. Doesn’t that sound like a nice treat?”

Dark was wearing a summery, stylish suit made of hemp fabric. Today’s shirt had noticeably less frills than normal, and his tie was of the rather plain variety as well. If I ignored the large weathervane rooster on his ribbon-adorned hat, his ensemble didn’t particularly stand out either. It almost felt a bit lacking in comparison to his usual overaccessorized outfits...

Wait, no! Having a weathervane on his hat at all still makes him perfectly weird!

I shook my head.

Dark’s manner was blatantly exaggerated compared with any other British gentleman that one might encounter. The fact that I ever viewed him to be a mature adult was just proof of how he’d poisoned my brain. Dark, seeming to believe I was opposed to the concept of tropical drinks, wore a troubled look on his face.

“Very well. If you don’t care for foreign drinks, then I’ll drop the idea of the juice stand altogether.”

“What? That’s not what I—”

“There’s no need to lie for my sake. Shall we visit the other locations?”

Dark took my hand and escorted me to the next section of the garden.

We left the vegetation area and found ourselves in the section set up for special events. This was the main attraction of the pleasure garden—the same castle that was featured in silhouette form on the front gate where guests entered the garden.

Once the two of us crossed a bridge over a small river, we arrived at the grand castle that looked exactly like something out of a fairy tale.

While this building had nothing on Buckingham or Hampton Court Palace in terms of size, its light-blue-and-white walls immediately tickled my fancy.

“What an adorable castle.”

“It’s only a castle on the outside. The inside is a venue for dances.”

Dark led me into the building, which turned out to be a large dance hall indeed. Massive chandeliers hung from the ceiling overhead.

The marble floors had been polished to give a beautiful sparkling gleam, and the room itself was lined with elegant Greek columns. Each wall was painted with colorful birds in flight throughout a forest of foreign trees.

For its Londoner guests who'd grown weary of city life, the hall's decorations were certain to be a dazzling display.

"How lovely. Now I see why you wanted to hold our engagement party here."

"I'm glad to hear you share my sentiments. I want this party to be an enjoyable experience for all, with bouquets throughout the hall and wine and food for every guest. There can be cakes and desserts for the young ladies, performances to keep young children entertained, and an orchestra to fill the hall with celebratory music. I'll leave the managing to Gramps and Hisui while the two of us dance in center stage together. Just like this."

Dark took my hand and began to dance in a waltz. Sunlight poured in through the glass dome ceiling above, illuminating us like a spotlight.

As I moved my feet along with him, I immediately felt nervous. I was capable of dancing to a certain extent, but seeing as how I spent all my balls as a wallflower, it wasn't a polished skill of mine whatsoever.

I had to be very careful not to trample on Dark's feet.

Left, right, back, back.

As I rushed to keep up with him, he whispered into my ear.

"You can go at your own pace. I'll follow you. I don't mind if you leap into my arms or give a twirl either."

"I'll twirl, but you're setting the bar a bit too high."

"It's not so difficult. Here, let's try."

Dark lifted his arm, causing me to rise to my tiptoes. He flipped his hand around in a way that caused my body to naturally spin in a circle.

My skirt billowed out around me like a bird's wings unfolding. My body felt weightless, and I could practically hear the sound of an orchestra playing in time with my steps.

"Well done, Alice."

"I only managed it because of your lead."

Wrapped in his embrace, I felt my heart struck with an arrow when I raised my head.



Dark's eyes were filled with such deep compassion as he looked down at me. His silver hair sparkled in the light. Those dreamy blue eyes cast him more as a prince than any demon.

I realized, for the first time, how those beautiful eyes had been watching me all along. Even during the Sleeping Beauty cases, when we worked in opposition to find the truth, and now, even among all the disgrace I experienced in investigating Jack the Ripper. Those eyes never changed in how they looked at me. I always had to avert my gaze, unable to accept just how captivated I felt by him, but right now, I never wanted to take my eyes off his.

Being with Dark made me feel like a girl again. No longer was I the head of my family, fated to protect Great Britain from the shadows—just by taking the hand of the man I loved and dancing with him, I was able to simply be a girl experiencing bliss.

The more we danced, the more I felt the unease in my heart over Jack's arrest fade away, little by little. My steps became lighter and our tempos came together to match perfectly.

Finally, I gave one last triple spin before collapsing against Dark's chest. I burst into laughter.

"Hehe! That was fun!"

"It was a pleasant diversion, wasn't it? I'm glad I invited you here."

"Is that why you brought me here? So I could have a break? I thought you were only interested in finding a venue for the engagement party."

Dark shrugged his shoulders at my wide-eyed stare.

"Not even I could be so thoughtless, watching your family go through hardship like this. Once Jack the Ripper is caught and the two of us can start being proactive in thinking about our futures, we can come back and take another look at all this. I'd like to hear your own thoughts next time. It's supposed to be an engagement party for the two of us, and yet I've been taking charge of everything this whole time."

"...The kind of party I'd like..."

I'd been wishing the entire thing could take place under the veil of night, ideal for secrecy. The guestlist would be short enough so that each guest could be searched for weapons, and the venue would be filled with traps and arms in case of any unexpected trouble...

But once I got that far in my thinking, I nearly fell to the ground where I stood.

If anyone's not normal here, it's me.

Shuddering from the realization of my own peculiarities, I quietly slipped away from Dark.

"Alice?"

"...Dark, are you sure I'm who you want to be with?"

The question I'd been holding inside my chest rose up to my throat and forced its way out of my lips.

"There are people in this kingdom who despise the Liddells. For every person we've executed, there are more out there who aim to claim our own lives too. I'm this family's leader. I can never so much as step foot outside without protection. Today is no different, is it?"

I knew that Dum and Dee were stationed outside the castle at that very moment. They'd been keeping their eyes on Dark and me from a distance as we strolled throughout the pleasure garden on our own.

"I always have to be on guard when it comes to my surroundings. Someone in my home is awake at all times, even in the middle of the night, to handle potential intruders. Without a series of traps around the house, the kind that could take your life with one wrong step, I can never feel at ease."

I knew Dark was already well versed in the intensity of my home's defense system. But none of those traps were enough to stop the tragedy from many years prior. The dreadful memory of losing my family stayed in my heart at all times, like stains of blood that never managed to fully dry.

"Marrying me won't be like marrying any other young lady. You may go the rest of your life without a decent night's sleep ever again. Knowing that, can you really say that you still want to be with me?"

"Yes, I can."

Dark's answer came immediately. His sincerity was palpable.

"There's only one person in the entire world that I wish to marry, and that person is Alice Liddell."

With that declaration, Dark knelt before me and placed his hand on his chest.

"My love belongs to you. Will you accept it, my lady?"

I couldn't help but chuckle when I heard such a dramatic line.

“My room is filled with all the presents you’ve given me.”

Before he became trapped in London, Dark often paid visits to the Liddell manor, and he never failed to arrive with gifts for the family.

For me, he brought things like gloves, umbrellas, and other accessories. For the twins, he brought toys and picture books. Leeds received contact information for other nobles that Dark met in upper-class salons. Jack received rare and unusual tableware.

When I told Dark he was going overboard in his kindness, he instead began to bring things like desserts and teas to be used for that day’s various tea parties. This served as a reason to bring Hisui along with him, whom the twins always loved to see. It seemed that wooing me wasn’t his end goal—he wanted the approval of my family as well.

Aside from Dark, there was no one else in the world with whom I could discuss the future of the Liddell family.

“But there’s still empty space left in my home. So, yes...I’ll take your love as well.”

I took Dark’s hand. I was surprised to feel it trembling slightly.

“I do accept your proposal, but please give me more time to consider our marriage. If I am married into the Knightley family, it means the end of the Liddells, and my family business isn’t one that can simply be handed over to an earl like yourself. As the one remaining member of the Liddell bloodline, living under another name would be a betrayal to the entire history of my family.”

“I assumed that this would be something we needed to discuss. I’d also like us to consult with a legal specialist when it comes to the inheritance of titles. Fortunately, I have some connections in that area. I believe Her Majesty will also give full support to our marriage, so let’s take our time to work this matter out.”

I felt a weight lift from my shoulders after hearing Dark agree to my request. I was truly glad to learn that he was more than just a fool in love who didn’t care about things like families and titles.

When the two of us left the castle together, we found Dum, Dee, and Hisui standing in the creek, splashing each other with water.

“Look at that. Such reliable bodyguards they are.”

“So it seems. I’ll bet they’re strengthening their bond of friendship so that they’re prepared to battle together whenever required. I know you’re always alert for danger, Alice, but these

three are showing you that there can still be plenty of peaceful moments among your surroundings. Your life isn't so different from that of any other young lady. There's been no signs of any demons lately either."

"Now that I think about it, I haven't seen any lesser demons around ever since the Rose Demon was banished."

"Well, one demon in particular has had a hand in that."

Dark smiled and stroked my hair.

"I won't let any lesser beings lay a finger on my love."

"So you've been protecting me, is that right? I wondered why you visited almost every single day."

I decided to take a closer look at Dark's presents when I returned. I imagined I would find his crescent moon seal hidden among them, perhaps in ways I wouldn't have expected.

Aside from preventing the intrusion of other demons, I wonder what powers a demon's seal might hold?

As I silently decided I'd burn all of Dark's presents in the garden if they were capable of transmitting images or sound back to him, I called out to the three frolicking boys.

"Dum, Dee, Mr. Hisui. We'll be taking our leave now."

They dried themselves off, put on their shoes, and returned to Dark and me.

As we walked through the promenade and toward the front gates, I noticed a crowd of people gathered outside a café in the dining area. When I heard an accompanying sickly-sweet voice coming from that crowd, I suddenly felt a sense of dread bubble up inside me.

"Thank you all for coming out to see me today!"

A very pretty young girl was waving her hands, sending her orange pigtails bobbing, at an ice cream stand on the side of the road. Her short circle dress looked like something out of a 1950s diner. It was completely out of place for Victorian London.

"It's Tierra Lockholmes..."

Tierra and I had crossed paths during the last case I investigated. She was previously the mascot for a public safety campaign, but she also tricked a group of young ladies into believing she was Dark's fiancée and even launched various forms of harassment against me.

That whole incident ended with my exposure of the wrongdoings of her father—the chief of police—and the publication

of her own scandal, forcing her to withdraw from the spotlight...

However, not only had her popularity failed to wane, it actually increased exponentially. The crowd of men surrounding Tierra let out a ferocious roar in response to her each and every move. It appeared that the underground idol-esque mascot was now using the pleasure garden as her stage.

“Be sure to buy your ice cream at Sweet ’n’ Chilly London Ice Cream, everyone! It’s the best in the whole city! As their salesgirl, I’m going to be singing and dancing here for a very special show. If you want a photo of me with your ice cream, that’ll be half a guinea, but one guinea can get you a ticket to my show too! I hope to see you all there!!”

Her method of garnering sales was the same as ever. Not wanting to disrupt the passionate display of fans greeting their idol, I quieted my movements and tried to pass. But Tierra cried out “Wait!” and stopped me in my tracks. Reluctantly, I turned to see the girl rushing in our direction and coming to a halt in front of Dark and me.

I couldn’t ignore her at this distance. With no choice left but to engage, I decided to greet Tierra.

“Good day, Miss Lockholmes. I certainly didn’t expect to see you here.”

After using my powers to wake Tierra up from her slumber during the mystery of the Sleeping Beauties, I left the room before she had the chance to say anything to me, so it had been quite some time since our last conversation. Now, I kept my hands guarded near me, but Tierra reached out and gripped one of them in hers.

“I’ve been wanting to see you again, Miss Liddell!”

“...Pardon?”

Her large eyes sparkled as she looked up at me. I couldn’t hide my own grimace.

If my memory served, the two of us weren’t on good terms, and there was no reason for her to be so enthused to meet me here. But Tierra appeared overwhelmingly grateful for our encounter, and she launched into a tale of her circumstances.

“I heard that you were the one to wake me from my long period of repose. After the things my father did, I was shunned by the upper class, but I’ve always wanted to see you again to express my gratitude. It’s all thanks to you, Miss Liddell, that I’m alive and well as you see now. Thank you so very much!”

“You never thanked me, no...but I’m still the person who attacked you for your past misdeeds in front of a large group of noblewomen...”

Even though Tierra was very much at fault for her actions, I fully expected her to resent me for what I did.

I quietly pulled my hand from her grasp. But Tierra’s onslaught didn’t stop there.

“It was the exact wake-up call I needed. I’m no longer going to live for nothing but marriage and riches. I want to be a strong, independent woman like yourself, Miss Liddell. That’s why I’m working here today!”

She gave a twirl to show off her outfit. Tierra really was the perfect girl to be an idol. Her presence alone made me feel like I could see colorful lights illuminating the area around us.

“I’m renting an apartment on Baker Street where I live all by myself, and I got a job here at the pleasure garden as a regular performer. I thought I could gradually form relationships with members of the upper class, and that would lead me back to you, but seeing you today saves me a lot of trouble. Now I can finally command Alice’s Bodyguard Army without having to sit around and wait anymore!”

It was actually very progressive for a woman to live on her own in these times. Great Britain in the Victorian era placed heavy limitations on what kinds of jobs women could perform, and those were all seen as temporary situations until she was able to wed. Most women who came to London from outside the city seemed to prioritize starting families with male laborers of good prospects.

As much as I wanted to support Tierra’s unique attempts to find success as an idol performer, it was the last part of her explanation that stuck out to me.

“My...bodyguard...army...?”

“We’re your fan club, Miss Liddell! We adore you, worship you as a master, and would even die for you! My goal is to recruit troops throughout London, use their membership fees to create nice posters and calendars of you, then fill our homes with all of your merchandise, Miss Liddell.”

“Eek!”

I had no idea that such a terrifying organization was in the process of being formed. I looked to Dark for help, only to hear him give an eager “How much does a membership cost?”

"My life isn't for your amusement, Dark. Don't make me cross with you."

"But I can tell that you're already cross. Or maybe that's because my love is the only love you desire? How charming. In that case, I'll fight to the death to destroy this bodyguard army that Miss Tierra is attempting to build."

"You're a fearless man if you think you can oppose me, Lord Knightley. I, Tierra Lockholmes, will never allow you to monopolize Miss Liddell for yourself. Even if I have to charm an army of men from throughout London to lead an attack on your very home."

Sparks flew back and forth between the two. From the middle, I could only cradle my head in despair.

How did their relationship end up here...?

"Can you both keep your bodyguard army and delusions under control? I won't allow any poster or calendar production without my permission. I have the rights to my own likeness, after all."

From behind us, our bodyguards—who still seemed to be most interested in playtime—chimed in casually.

"I want an Alice poster."

"I want an Alice calendar."

"His Lordship already has your portrait."

I jumped when I heard Hisui's shocking statement.

"Mr. Hisui, please tell me more about this portrait."

"Who knows what is fact and what is fiction...?"

Though his statement sounded more like the ending of a spooky story, it was enough proof of the horrific truth that Dark had hired a painter to produce a portrait of me.

I pressed Dark for more information. He revealed that he was planning to take it back home with him when he returned to his own territory.

"I thought it would make for a nice bedroom decoration while I had to be apart from my beloved and all. It features my absolute favorite smile of yours. Don't worry, it turned out flawless."

"That isn't my objection. I simply don't want you producing merchandise of me without my permission. Mr. Hisui, Dum, and Dee. We're going to the Knightley residence now. We've got a portrait to burn!"

At my command, Hisui left to retrieve the carriage. Dark stared at me blankly, asking if I truly wanted to destroy his precious painting. But his cute act was powerless on me. I meant business.

“That’s the Miss Liddell I know. There’s a bit of evil in how you wield your utmost power. Such a cool demeanor you have!”

Tierra clasped her hands together in extreme excitement. It was then that I spotted an acrostic ring on the ring finger of her right hand.

“Miss Tierra, is that...?”

“It’s a present from a fan of mine. The first letter of each gem spells out a message. Rings like this are very popular right now! This one has a peridot, ruby, emerald, two tourmalines, and a yellow sapphire. Together, that spells *pretty*.”

That was certainly the perfect word to describe Tierra. Seeing as how she was wearing it as she worked, I first imagined she must have been truly happy to receive such a ring, but now I saw that it was a way of pleasing her fans.

“I’ve received seven other rings with the same message, but I only kept this one and sold the rest. I used the money to buy myself some new outfits.”

Wow...! I was struck by the resolve she showed in so casually selling off gifts from others. Perhaps Tierra’s shameless personality was a necessity for any woman who wanted to live on their own like that.

“How strange to receive the same ring from seven different people.”

“The first one I got seemed to boost their popularity. Such romantic rings are out of reach for those who can’t afford to purchase large gems, but the thought of someone taking the time to put a message into a present, well, that’s what makes the ladies swoon. Not that such average little things are enough to win *my* fancy. The bigger and more expensive the gems, the better a present they make, of course.”

“I see...”

My mind drifted to the image of a pair of lovers exchanging acrostic rings.

The very act of conceiving a message that would convey their love for the other, and the time taken to browse books of gems and pick out each letter of said message—they must be moments of profound joy all on their own. I could also imagine the recipient’s feelings upon receiving such a meaningful ring...the one exception, perhaps, being Tierra.

Jack has someone he cares for that deeply.

Jack's secret had been quite a shock to me. I didn't even want to think about what message he might have put into that ring of his. But if he truly was in love with someone, it was my duty to support their relationship.

Just as I refused to live the life of the otome game heroine I was born as, Jack was attempting to walk a path of his own. Even as a love interest character, he had every right to pursue his own happiness.

The broken "Jack" had found love for another. Despite how alone and saddened this made me feel, it wasn't something I could selfishly object to.

I need to let go of my bias, just like parents let go of their children.

Tierra's show was drawing near, and so she parted ways with us reluctantly and headed back to the ice cream stand. I shook away my concerns and looked up at Dark.

"All right. Let's get going to the Knightley residence. I want to see each and every portrait you've had done of me!"

Later that day, as I walked along while viewing the majestic white walls of the Knightley family home, my head throbbed and ached more and more as I witnessed portrait after portrait of myself—hung up in the hallways, dining room, and even Dark's bedroom.

Dark's tearful cries for mercy were the only reason I didn't burn them outright. Instead, I was busy late into the evening having every last portrait thrown out, frame and all.

Chapter 4: Lover on the Run

AS our carriage pressed onward through the night, Dark alone was wailing in his seat.

"I can't believe you've finally initiated contact between us, and so late at night too. You even brought your dear twins with you. My heart brims with joy!"

The black lilies on his frock coat bobbed with each dab of his eyes.

Since I requested that he dress in simple, dark clothes, his accessories were definitely more toned-down than usual today. However, his top hat remained as oversized and lacy as ever.

Dum sat at Dark's side and wore a black sailor suit. Dee was beside me, wearing the exact same outfit and joining his brother in staring curiously at Dark.

"Alice, should we console him?"

"Alice, should we beat him into silence?"

"Please don't attempt either of those options. Dark, you're far too loud. That's enough crying already."

Despite my admonishment, Dark simply shook his head from side to side.

"I simply cannot, for I understand what's going on here. This is a trial date to see if the children take a liking to me, and if they do, you'll consider making us a family. Rest assured, Alice. Nothing could ever come between me and my twins. Once we're married, I'll show you just what a fine father I can be!"

"Why on earth do you want to be their father? How many times must I tell you to stop referring to my boys as your own family?!"

I whisked a handgun out of my heart-shaped pochette and shoved it against Dark's forehead.

"If you offend me again, I'll gladly shove you straight out of the carriage."

"How cruel. I'm the one who's been trapped inside London, unable to return home."

Dark, having ceased in his act of crocodile tears, turned to stare off at Big Ben in the distance.

"I don't know who this Mirror Demon might be, but I can think of only two things they could be after. The first is the Knightley territory itself. I inquired about the state of the region but learned that the land, people, crops, and weather are all perfectly normal. That leaves one other option. The Mirror Demon may very well be after me personally."

"After you?"

I felt a chill run down my spine. A demon was a formidable foe. Dark had his own powers to boast of, but if he was outnumbered in an ambush, I knew from experience just how much danger he might be in.

"Are you sure you're all right? You haven't been attacked by the demon already, have you?"

"It hasn't laid a hand on me as of yet."

Dark saw that I was anxious and patted the top of my head.

"Thank you for your concern, Alice. Despite the situation in which I find myself, I'm glad just to be by your side. I owe the Mirror Demon my gratitude, if only for bringing us closer together."

Dark's smile was so heartfelt, I had to turn my head away from him and pretend like it had no effect on me at all.

"What a troublesome demon. I hope to find it soon and deliver its punishment."

We arrived near the National Archives building, exited our carriage, and snuck behind a cluster of trees from which we could see the front gates.

Our black clothes made it easy to blend in with the shadows of the foliage. We hid there momentarily so that we could make use of the power the twins held with their stigmas.

The Tweedle brothers possessed the Hide and Seek stigma—the power to render themselves invisible to onlookers. We would use this ability to sneak past the guards and into the National Archives, where we could search for new pieces of information.

The four of us held hands in a circle and crouched low to the ground. I found myself next to Dark, meaning I had to hold his hand, and considering our last exchange of words, I kept my cheeks puffed in a pout. The twins cocked their heads at me.

"What's the matter, Alice?"

"What's wrong, Alice?"

“It’s nothing. Let’s hurry inside.”

At my command, Dum and Dee exchanged glances and nodded at each other. The moles on each of their cheeks began to drip down like teardrops, gliding across their skin to form the image of a rose.

The sensation of static electricity filled my body and sent my bangs afloat in the air. Simultaneously, all four of us began to grow transparent, starting from our fingertips and spreading throughout our bodies. I looked down and saw the grass on the ground through my own feet.

As Dark experienced the twins’ strange power for the very first time, he nearly drew his hand away in surprise.

“What’s happening...?”

“The power stops working if you separate from the twins. We have to keep holding hands as we move.”

“I see. What a strange power. It will be a taxing test on my eyes when I play hide and seek with them, won’t it?”

With our hands still together, the four of us left the grove of trees and headed for the gate. We were able to slip inside after waiting for the bayonet-wielding guards to change positions on their patrol of the perimeter.

Stone buildings always appeared plenty robust, but when they stood for so many years, they tended to wear down in a unique way. The National Archives was no different. One of its window frames was poorly fitted within the wall. That window should have been my destination, but instead, I realized my legs had carried me straight to the back door before I could go anywhere else.

I played this part so many times in my past life, it’s actually become a habit now.

During the game, once you arrive at the back door of the archives and see that it’s locked, you’re presented with the option to wrap around to the side of the building. But now that I saw the back door and its detailed carved design, I realized that something was different.

The door isn’t locked.

I hadn’t expected this change. The back door was never once unlocked in the game. Once I looked to see that no guards were nearby to watch us, I gently nudged the door open.

The four of us saw that no one appeared to be inside, crept into the building ourselves, and quietly closed the door behind us. It

was then that we could relax a bit.

"We're safe for now. But I wonder why the door was unlocked this time?"

I glanced down the hall. The door to a reference room was slightly ajar, revealing an orange glow coming from the other side. I peeked through the gap and surveyed the interior.

I then noticed a young man with glasses standing in front of a shelf of procedural documents. He held a candlestick in one hand, seemingly busy absorbing the documents before him.

The man looked as skinny as a twig. Though his silver-framed glasses gave him an intellectual appearance, his long hair—reaching all the way down to his waist—was more meager in presentation. He gazed down at the papers with a look of pure focus.

It was a shame to see that after all our effort to sneak into the building, we wouldn't be able to gather information on our own. Just as I was about to give up and head for home, Dark let out a curious noise, released his hand from the twins', and pushed the door open.

"Why, if it isn't Bill Trevor!"

"AAAHH! Lord Knightley?!"

The young man—Trevor—sent his candlestick flying in a panic. I watched the lit candle soar through the air and quietly voiced an order.

"Dum, Dee. Catch that candle!"

The twins sprang into action like a gust of wind. Dum caught the stick, while Dee caught the candle itself. Fortunately, the flame remained lit, casting a constant red glow inside the room.

"Here you go."

"Here you go."

"Thanks, you two. That could have caused quite the fire!"

Trevor retrieved the candle and stared up at Dark, practically trembling.

"What brings you here so late at night, and with two angelic little children along with you? Don't tell me you're here to party with these ki— P-P-Pardon me. I've merely heard secondhand that nobles are always partying in one way or another at night. Please don't be upset at my mistake!"

When I heard his self-deprecating way of speaking and took in his timid demeanor, something clicked in my mind.

This glasses guy isn't just a background character.

Between his long, silky hair and his rude-yet-polite manner of speech, I could tell that this was a character who'd been fleshed out. I wondered if he was someone newly added with the release of the game's DLC—maybe even someone who might give us a much-needed hint in solving our mystery.

As I stood back in the hallway, Dark called for me to join them.

"Come, Alice. Though he appears to be afraid, this is actually a friend of mine."

"Good evening. I am Alice, the head of the Liddell fa—"

As I held my dress above my shoes and stepped forward, Trevor suddenly ducked behind the bookshelf.

"Um... Is something wrong?"

"F-F-Forgive me. I'm not so great around women!"

"Interacting with women makes Bill Trevor here nervous," Dark explained to me, then turned to Bill Trevor. "Do you think you can introduce yourself?"

"No way. Please do it for me, Lord Knightley!"

Dark swooped in with a smile to introduce the man, who was currently trembling like he was stranded on a frigid mountaintop.

"Alice, this is Bill Trevor, a judge. He's a sharp man, which means the poor guy always ends up having everyone else force their own work on him. But he transforms into the most dignified of judges in the courtroom, so when it comes to getting things done, you won't find anyone more reliable."

"Please, you flatter me. It's too much praise! Now, if you're Miss Liddell, does that mean you're Lord Knightley's...f-f-f-fiancée?!"

"That's what we tell people, at least."

Trevor let out a fearful squeak and blushed when I responded. He started grinding his head against the bookshelf.

The shelves were lined with rows of books and files, while its drawers appeared stuffed with documents. It was weighed down enough it shouldn't tip over, but if Trevor did manage to knock it off-balance, the entire reference room would turn into a game of dominoes.

Dark didn't seem particularly swayed by my concerns. He continued to poke fun at the judge.

"But we do indeed have true feelings for each other. I have permission from Alice's family to take her out at night, so don't you

worry about that. She has a pair of capable guards along as well, so they wouldn't let me do anything untoward. Isn't that right, my dear twins?"

When Dark smiled at them, the boys clung to my skirt on both sides.

"We'll protect Alice."

"We'll protect Alice."

"So you two are Miss Liddell's guards... That's impressive work for such young boys."

Trevor knelt down to smile at the two.

His dark robe and diagonal crimson sash draped over the floor. This was the standard uniform of all Administration of Justice employees. Real-life judges also wore things like scarves, girdles, and curly white wigs, making Trevor's style of outfit look a bit unique, but on the other hand, the lack of excess in his manner of dressing was hard to dislike.

Yeah, that's an otome game character, all right. I can see why the ladies would love him.

As I nodded in silent acceptance of this conclusion, Trevor remained at my feet. He spoke in a gentle voice.

"As Lord Knightley already said, my name is Bill Trevor. I'm a judge who tries people at the courthouse. May I ask your names?"

"I'm Dum, Alice's right hand."

"I'm Dee, Alice's left hand."

"Hello, Dum and Dee. It must be past your bedtime. Aren't you sleepy? I'd be happy to make you some tea in the break ro— Ack!"

Trevor, who'd been captivated by the twins, recoiled when he looked up and saw my face just above him. Up close, I could see how thick the lenses of his glasses were.

"These angels distracted me. There's a w-w-w-woman...right in front of me..."

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Bill Trevor. Women aren't circus beasts, after all. I promise she has no intention of eating you."

Dark lifted the man back up to his feet. A cold sweat had broken out on Trevor's face. His teeth chattered as he snapped back at Dark.

"You only think that way because you're popular with the ladies, my lord. To men like myself, women are exactly like a newly discovered species of animal found in the depths of an unexplored

jungle. Besides, I'm too busy with work to meet any women anyway. How am I ever supposed to get over this fear?!"

"You're overthinking it. Just come to me and I'd be happy to introduce you to a young lady from a good family. The idea is to converse about things such as your daily lives at first, without any intention of courting her, until the two of you are able to form a friendly relationship."

"Daily life?! That's the absolute worst thing to discuss! All I can do is complain about all the work my boss forces on me, how to most efficiently ingest caffeine in order to make it through all the overtime I put into this taxing business, and the episodes of extreme misfortune in my life!"

I'd noticed he was very thin, but perhaps Trevor's physique was actually a result of constantly overworking himself to the brink of death. The realization hit me suddenly.

He's dedicated to his work, but deep down, he's extremely unsatisfied... He's the "corporate drone" character!

This character trope never appeared at any point in *Evil Alice's Lover's* main game. Trevor wasn't simply a background character after all. I was interested in knowing more about him, but as my hands were so full with Jack the Ripper at the moment, I didn't want to take any actions that might lead me into a new story route. Pursuing two routes at once would be too much of a distraction.

"Work's still giving you that much trouble, is it? I thought the chief of police's bribery case was all wrapped up now. Has something else come up?"

"Well... One of the veteran judges thrust a certain case on me. A nobleman's mistress is suing him for child support payments."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I'm curious, though. Which nobleman might this be?"

"This stays between us. It's none other than the Duke of Sharondale himself."

"Did you say the Duke of Sharondale?"

I couldn't help butting in to Dark and Trevor's hushed conversation.

The duke and duchess had already given birth to a baby of their own, but now they were wrapped up in an infidelity scandal. I could imagine how much pain the duchess must be feeling over all this.

"He's taken a mistress? Why on earth would the duke do such

a thing?"

When I raised my voice, Trevor twisted backward and away from me.

"A-A-A-All right, I'll tell you, I'll tell you! Just please don't come any closer!"

Bill trembled as he began to launch into a summary of the court case.

"His mistress was supposedly the manager of a store His Grace is invested in. She ran a jewelry store in the East End that markets itself more toward low-income workers. Though she fell pregnant and gave birth already, the duke refuses to acknowledge that the child is his, and so she decided to sue him for child support payments. She had every right to do so, as I saw it, but I never expected such a horrid outcome..."

"What sort of outcome is that?"

"The plaintiff passed away quite suddenly. Have you heard of the Jack the Ripper case? Kate Edward, the victim, was the Duke of Sharondale's supposed mistress."

"Jack the Ripper killed the duke's mistress?!"

It came as an utter shock. Neither Inspector Dodo nor Duke Sharondale had made any mention of this.

If the duke knew the victim beforehand, it suddenly made sense as to why a man like him would be in the East End in the first place. He could have even met with her in the pub where Jack worked, giving him an opportunity to see Jack's bandaged hand.

This is a very important clue.

I clapped my hands together and turned to face Trevor. He'd revealed a priceless piece of confidential information.

"Judge Trevor."

"D-D-D-Don't move at me so fast! Whatever is the matter, Miss Liddell?!"

"I have something I need to discuss with you. My family's butler was arrested, believed to be Jack the Ripper himself, but he's completely innocent."

"An innocent man under arrest?! That is unacceptable. The innocent must never be punished for crimes they did not commit. To think that the police, of all people, would violate such a principle..."

Trevor continued to shake as he launched into his speech. He was a judge and representative of the legal system, and I got the

sense that Jack's case wasn't something he could simply ignore.

"Miss Liddell. You must let me know what I can do to help. If it's necessary to prove his innocence, I wouldn't hesitate to let you step on me with your sharp heels or dump me naked in the street!"

Trevor gripped my hand, then immediately let out a squeal and pulled away from me.

"I'm s-s-s-so sorry. I didn't mean to squeeze your hand like that."

"It's perfectly fine. I appreciate your offer to help. Even though there's been no confession, the police have already made up their minds about my butler's guilt. They have no evidence that points to him either. The only clue is testimony from the Duke of Sharondale, who says he witnessed Jack near the scene of the crime."

"The Duke of Sharondale, whose mistress was the victim in this case? How suspicious..."

Though the duke hadn't made his relationship with the victim public, I was certain that Inspector Dodo had investigated this angle already. His insistence that Jack was the murderer probably came from a desire to save time and effort on any future investigations.

Inspector Dodo never let a single second go to waste. But, of course, maximizing efficiency wasn't sufficient reasoning to allow something like a mistaken arrest.

"I believe that the duke is deeply involved in this case. However, I also doubt that the police will care to look at him with suspicion now that a suspect has been arrested. If the public becomes aware that Jack has been falsely accused while the true Jack the Ripper roams free, the police wouldn't be able to escape the backlash. Please, I need to know how to save Jack."

When he heard my plea, Trevor began to consider it earnestly.

"...Indeed. A suspect's innocence or guilt is something to be determined in court by a judge and jury. If a single person objects, then deliberation must continue until a consensus can be reached. You'll have to submit damning evidence for him not to be found guilty, or even better, present the true culprit to the court, if possible."

"I see."

The process would be difficult. But if this was the only means of bringing Jack home, I was prepared to face whatever obstacles stood in my way.

"Thank you very much for the information."

“O-O-O-Of course! Please don’t bother bowing your head to me. The sheer guilt will drive me insane!”

Trevor leaped up when he saw me give a nod of sincere gratitude. After practically wrenching his body into the bookshelf, terrified, he called out once more to Dum and Dee.

“Don’t you worry, little angels. Your family member will make it back safely, I’m sure. Laws and judges exist in the service of justice. If anything happens, I want you to come visit me, Bill Trevor, at my home in Hampstead.”

“Okay!”

“Okay!”

Their simultaneous response received a cry of “How cute!” from Trevor. I could tell that he really loved children, and I imagined his sensitivity toward women must have been inflated by a lifetime of few opportunities to interact with the opposite sex. He was truly the embodiment of the full-fledged corporate drone character...!

Dark looked ready to wrap things up after seeing this exchange with the twins.

“Now that you three have said your goodbyes, I think it’s time for us to take our leave.”

“May I escort you to the exit?”

“No thank you. You’ve got research to finish, which you should make haste with. Sleep deprivation is poison to the body.”

It was a clever excuse. We could only exit the building with the help of the twins’ invisibility stigma, meaning Trevor’s presence along the way would make our escape impossible.

Trevor placed his hand on the open door to the reference room.

“I’ll remain here, in that case. Lord Knightley, Miss Liddell, little angels, please be careful on your way home. Good night.”

“Good night, Judge Trevor.”

I passed Trevor and stepped into the hall. But it was then that a sudden tickle overwhelmed my nose.

“Achoo! ...What was that?”

Somehow, I felt like I’d briefly caught the scent of black pepper. But when I turned back to glance down the hall, every single door was closed, and even as I inhaled deeply, that distinct aroma was nowhere to be smelled.



“**REST** well, you three. Good night.”

“Good night.”

After Dark dropped us off at the Liddell manor, I put Leeds in charge of the twins before retiring to my own bedroom. Once I changed into my negligee and quickly prepared for bed, I laid Jack’s saber on my bedside table—in place of a good-luck charm—before climbing under the covers.

What an exhausting day.

I’d made the right choice in inviting Dark to the National Archives. The information his judge friend, Bill Trevor, shared with us contained an invaluable clue in my quest to free Jack.

Hearing of Duke Sharondale’s infidelity was surprising enough, but that was nothing compared with finding out that his mistress was the one murdered by Jack the Ripper. However, this connection between the victim and the duke allowed me to form a hypothesis as to why he was in the East End in the first place.

His motive for being in Whitechapel was something he didn’t want to become known. By testifying that Jack was at the scene of the crime, he was able to muddy the details of the investigation, and Inspector Dodo latched onto this statement as well. The result was poor Jack being arrested as the primary suspect.

I didn’t yet know who the true culprit was, nor did I know the identity of the second victim. But it was far too early to give in. Meeting Trevor showed me just how few of the facts I had yet to grasp in this case. There was still more I could do to prove Jack’s innocence in court—of this, I was certain.

Just hang on a little longer, Jack.

I turned off my lantern and closed my eyes. The stagnant darkness in the room thickened under my eyelids. It rippled and sank in around me, permeating my very skin like a sunbather soaking up the sun on a beach.

Darkness came as a profound reassurance to me as “Alice”—a child of the Liddell family bloodline.

Our lineage was that of the family who condemned otherwise untouchable criminals throughout Great Britain’s history. We’d evolved to function best in the nighttime, where we carried out our solemn duty.

“...y.”

My hair and eyes shared the color of blood. The Duchess of Sharondale suggested I wear a blue dress that matched Dark's eyes for our engagement party, but no color suited me better than a depthless black.

My wardrobe consisted entirely of black clothes. From tiered dresses to evening gowns, headdresses, shoes, gloves, and even parasols—my clothes were all so black, even the slightest accents of white or red in my outfits seemed blindingly bright in contrast.

"...lady."

What put me most at ease wasn't the golden hair of the Tweedle brothers or Leeds's showy pink ensembles. It was Jack, with his black hair and clothes from head to toe, who was the most reassuring figure to have at my side.

There was never anyone I so truly trusted more than him.

Not, at least, until I met Lord Knightley—Dark—and received his divine, starlight protection.

"...Wake up, my lady."

I felt myself shaken awake just as I was on the verge of drifting off into a deep sleep. My heavy eyelids shot open when I realized who exactly was standing at the edge of my bed.

"Jack?!"

"Qu-Quiet down..."

Jack pressed his finger to his lips and covered my mouth to silence me. I stifled my breath and easily peered through the darkness to take a good look at him.

He appeared a bit thinner than how I remembered him from before his arrest, but his messy black hair and harsh gaze remained unchanged. It was really Jack—Alice's "bad-boy butler" in the flesh.

"Mmph! *Mmmph!*"

"Why am I here? I don't really know either. I heard my name being called, and when I opened my eyes and looked around my cell, I saw myself reflected on one of the walls. I thought it was a giant mirror or something, but when I put my hand up against it, it went right through, and I ended up here."

"Mmph! ...That means..."

I ripped his hand off my mouth and cried out immediately.

"The Mirror Demon must have done this!"

A human could never turn an entire wall into a mirror that acts as a portal. There was no doubt in my mind that the Mirror Demon had their hand in this.

The Mirror Demon, who had trapped Dark inside London, was the most suspicious character I'd encountered yet.

I couldn't explain why they would guide Jack out of jail. But my intuition told me that serious trouble was on the horizon.

"We have to get you back to jail. If anyone sees you missing, they'll assume you intentionally broke out. Quickly, before Inspector Dodo realizes anything is—"

Bang, bang! A sudden pounding on the door sent my heart nearly jumping out of my chest. From the hallway, I heard Leeds urgently calling for me.

"Wake up, my lady. The police just sent word that Jack's vanished from his cell, and they're going to come see if he's hiding out here!"

"Wh-What should we do...?"

My fear had already come true.

"The police are on their way," I said. "Perhaps we could simply explain that you slipped through the wall and ended up here... No, Inspector Dodo would never accept that. Let's think of a better excuse. For now, you'll have to hide out back on the road, Jack. I'll contact Dark and ask for a safe location where you can conceal yourself!"

"...Why him?"

"What?"

Jack reached out and grabbed my wrist. His face was twisted in pain, casting a shadow over his features.

"Why are you going to Knightley for help, my lady?!"

"That voice... Miss Alice, I'm coming in!"

Leeds rushed into the room once he heard Jack's angry outburst. He took one look at the boy and wrinkled his brow.

"How did you get inside Miss Alice's room...? Do you have the slightest idea how hard she's been working to investigate your case? Breaking out of jail is basically a confession of guilt!"

"It's not like that, Leeds. Jack only left because—"

I tried to come up with a cover story, but Leeds wasn't interested. He put his hands on his hips and pouted.

"Now she's going to have to run straight to Lord Knightley for help. He's already done so much for her! If she stays in his debt, she'll never be able to break off their engagement."

"Tsk. So bloody annoying..."

Jack clicked his tongue and retrieved his saber from my

bedside table. He reached out one arm and pulled me close.

“Kyah!!”

“Don’t move.”

I felt the cold blade pressed against my throat. Jack’s strong embrace told of his resolve. I knew I couldn’t struggle to break free without serious consequences.

Leeds stood dumbfounded like a father who’d just stumbled upon a prank from their child.

“What’s this about? I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but you let her go this instant.”

“Mind your own business. I’m a murderer, right? If you don’t want Miss Alice getting hurt, shut your mouth and get out of my way.”

“Jack? What are you talking about...?”

Until then, Leeds’s expression had been the usual one he wore while lecturing people, but I watched as the blood started to drain from his face. When he realized that Jack’s threat was real, even I could feel the skin-crawling shockwave of his pure fury.

“Go ahead, try your best, Jack. I’ll cut your throat before you can lay a finger on her!”

Just as Leeds reached down for his belt, the sound of a warning bell pierced the silence of the mansion. The police had arrived and tripped one of the traps around our property.

“You’re coming with me!”

With his arm around my waist, Jack kicked straight through the window. He sailed over the balcony and landed on the ground near the fountain. I clung to his neck so as not to fall off.

“What are you thinking, Jack?!”

“We’re getting out of here, obviously.”

He kicked the stones that surrounded the fountain. This caused the flow of water to cease, and before our eyes, a staircase to an underground passage opened up for us.

“Jack! Wait!”

Leeds bent over the balcony and sent his chains flying at us. Jack managed to dodge the heavy weight at the end, and as he raced down the staircase, he kicked a spot against the wall, collapsing the ceiling above us and plugging up the passage behind us in the process.

“That’ll buy us some time.”

Jack hoisted me up in his arms and took off running down a

completely unlit pathway.



I have to stop him. There's still time to convince the police that his escape was accidental.

We could turn back the way we'd come, explain to Inspector Dodo that Jack didn't mean to escape, then return him to police custody. Dark and I would discuss this new work of the Mirror Demon, find the true identity of Jack the Ripper, and prove Jack's innocence in a court of law. This was the quickest path to clearing Jack's name again. But on the other hand...

I don't want to leave him just yet...

No one took Jack's arrest harder than I did. As I felt his soft hair tickle my temple, each breath he took, his broad chest—every part of him filled my mind with fond memories, nearly moving me to tears.

I leaned my head against his shoulder and hugged him tight. I knew we were well on our way to a bad ending, and yet, I couldn't will myself to stop it.

"We're here."

Jack climbed up a staircase and pushed the wooden door open with his elbow. I raised my head, suddenly realizing we were in a different environment. This appeared to be an empty, quiet building at the end of the road we'd been following.

I noted the tall wooden ceiling and rows of simple benches across the floor. Though the building was unlit, starlight filtered in through a massive stained-glass window, illuminating the large cross fixed above a stage.

"Where are we?"

"A church outside of London that no one uses right now. The knowledge of the underground passage we took has been passed down through generations of servants, so I'm the only one who knows about it. Even if they get the entrance at the fountain open, it's too confusing to navigate unless you know the route. Leeds and the twins definitely won't find us here."

Jack set me down on one of the front benches. He walked over to a small water stream and dipped his cup into the current.

"Here. It's spring water, my lady."

I took a drink from the cup he handed me. Right away, I felt the dreamlike sentiments swirling inside me start to fade. The harsh reality I was facing hit me at once, like I'd just awoken from my sleep.

“Jack... We shouldn’t have done this. I know the alarm probably startled you, but it was wrong to run from Leeds. He’s family too. He wasn’t going to harm you. If you’d been honest and told him you arrived here by walking through a mirror, the three of us could’ve figured out an excuse to give the police together.”

“Like the police would ever listen to what I had to say. Plus, I’m sick of going to other people for help. That’s why *he* was almost able to steal you away from me in the first place.”

“‘He’?”

“I’m talking about Knightley!”

Jack took the cup from my hands and sent it slamming against the ground. The aged porcelain shattered, sending fragments of blue Eryngium flowers flying in all directions.

“You two only pretended to be engaged to lure in the Rose Demon. But even after the Sleeping Beauties woke up, he still treated you like his lover. Then Her Majesty went and spread rumors about you two all through high society. At this rate, he’s going to steal you from the Liddell family and force you to become his bride. I can’t just sit back and watch it happen!”

“Calm down, Jack. I’d never throw away the Liddell name for marriage. Dark understands that already. We’ve discussed waiting to marry until we can find a way that doesn’t involve the Liddell family losing the baron title. Should he try to force me to wed, I’ll never say the words *I do*. Not if—”

My attempts to reassure Jack were met with a piercing scowl.

“Are you sure about that? Even though you look so happy whenever Knightley shows his face at the house?”

“!”

I clasped my hands to my cheeks when I heard that. I’d always tried to hide my feelings for Dark around my family, but this was the first time I realized that any of them could still see it on my face all the same.

Jack gritted his teeth. I could see the pain in his expression.

“Are you in love with Lord Knightley?”

“I’m...”

I’m not. Those were the only words I needed to say. But they refused to come out.

The promise I made with Dark in the Sharondale Gardens castle flashed in my mind.

Dark wanted me. Despite the grim history of the Liddell family

that fell upon my shoulders and the fact that I was most adapted to a life under the veil of night, Dark told me that he didn't think less of me compared with any other woman. His eyes were full of sincerity and never once strayed. With everything Dark had given me, I could never bring myself to despise him.

I closed my mouth, unable to respond. Jack continued on weakly.

"...I really thought you'd be the one to lead the Liddell family until you died. I was going to keep these feelings locked away, as long as I got to stay by your side. But I can't hold it in anymore. My heart feels like it's gonna burn to ash when I see you with Knightley. I can practically smell the smoke rising inside my body. It's been bloody, bloody awful..."

I could feel the anguish in Jack's voice as he poured his heart out. He then took my right hand and knelt down on one knee. The mature face of the man staring up at me was like that of a knight pledging an oath to his princess.

As I stood there, terribly uncertain of what to do, Jack had only three words for me.

"I love you."

This was Jack's confession.

My eyes went wide with pure shock. I watched Jack retrieve a ring from his pocket and slide it onto my ring finger. There it was, sparkling in the light of the stars—the same acrostic ring design that I'd seen in the East End jewelry shop.

The first gem was a diamond, followed by an emerald, amethyst, ruby, another emerald, sapphire, and finally, a tourmaline. Their first letters spelled out the word *dearest*.

Ah...

I finally connected each piece of dormant information together. It cleared every other thought from my mind, until I had no idea left of what I could possibly do.

Jack really had been in love. I'd been so certain that his double life was in the pursuit of a stranger. But I was wrong.

The intended recipient of the ring he'd worked so hard to earn was none other than "Alice."

"I"

Tears began to spill from my eyes.

I'd always dreamed of hearing Jack confess his love to me. It was a desire from my past life, when we were merely an otome

game player and the love interest. He was my bias. I longed to be with him.

Nothing in the world should have made me happier, and yet...

That heart-fluttering sensation he made me feel in my past life...was gone.

Jack wasn't the one I wanted in that moment. My true love was another—the clingy demon with the silver hair, glimmering as if it were woven with moonlight, who was unable to so much as leave his house without the help of an overaccessorized hat.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry, Jack..."

I slipped my right hand out of his grip, then covered my face as I began to cry.

"I really do love you. Those feelings are true. But it's too late. My heart belongs to—"

"There you two are."

A man pushed open the misshapen door that separated the church from the outside world.

His shadow stretched across the floor, revealing a pair of sharp horns jutting out from his head. I was so taken aback, I looked closer and realized that the horns were nothing more than ribbons wrapped around his hat.

"Knightley..."

As soon as Dark caught a glimpse of my tears, his eyes narrowed on Jack.

"It's been a while, hasn't it, Jack? Unfortunately, I knew exactly where you were. Alice and I are connected by a stigma, after all."

Dark pointed the end of his cane at us. Blue-white sparks of light shot forth and formed the image of a crescent-moon seal in the air. I felt my chest grow warm, and when I looked down, the same seal was floating over my exposed skin under my negligee.

"I won't allow you to lay a hand on her. Think about what you're doing."

He stepped forward, holding his cane out like at the start of a fencing match. The floating crest shot forward, knocking Jack's muscled body straight into the stained-glass window.

"Ngh!"

Pieces of shattered glass showered the floor, but the crest itself kept Jack suspended in the air. I saw a stream of bright red blood trailing from where he must have cut his head on impact.

“Jack!”

“Don’t touch him, Alice. You’ll cut yourself on the glass.”

Dark wrapped his arms around me from behind.

“He’s done something he wasn’t supposed to. If he’d only stayed put in his cell, we would’ve had enough time to prove his innocence. But now, he didn’t stop at just escaping. He came to kidnap you, his master, as well. I want to find out why he’d do something so foolish.”

With ragged breaths, Jack sneered down at Dark from above.

“You’re...the last person...I’d ever tell...”

“That’s unfortunate. I was hoping we could come to understand each other.”

Dark lowered his cane. The light of the crest faded to nothing, and Jack collapsed down on the floor.

A rush of footsteps suddenly became audible. It was a crowd of police officers bursting into the church. They swarmed Jack, who was currently defenseless, and roughly tied him up with rope.

Inspector Dodo waddled in after the rest. He retrieved his pocket watch and looked at the time.

“Two a.m., thirty-five minutes, and fifty seconds. The runaway ‘Jack’ has been taken back into custody. Was the hostage injured, Lord Knightley?”

“Not that I saw. Just to be safe, I’ll have her checked out by my personal doctor.”

“Good thinking. Miss Liddell’s injuries may be to the heart, having been abducted by a servant she felt she could trust. Please report any updates to the police station right away. We’ll add assault to his crimes of murder and jailbreak. Hey, the kid’s trying to get free. Shut him up for me.”

At Inspector Dodo’s signal, one of the officers kicked Jack in his restraints.

“Don’t hurt him! Jack didn’t do anything to me!”

But my words went unheard. They hauled Jack away, as he’d fallen unconscious, slammed the door behind them, and left Dark and me alone in the silence of the church.

“I’m so glad you’re safe...”

Dark pressed his cheek against mine and breathed a sigh of relief.

“When I heard you’d been kidnapped, I felt like I would drop dead on the spot. He didn’t do anything to you, did he?”

“Not you too... Jack would never hurt me.”

“Humans do terrible things when they’re backed into a corner. As I looked for you, I felt your sadness and despair inside me. It was so hard on you, wasn’t it?”

Dark didn’t have to search for me on a regular basis, but apparently, when it was urgent, he had the power to pin down my location.

“It’s only me here right now. Tell me what happened. You’re sure Jack didn’t do anything?”

“He told me he loved me. Then he gave me the ring he had made at that jeweler’s in the East End.”

I held up my right hand to show him my ring. The sight made Dark’s blue eyes go ablaze with heat. Those were the very same flames of jealousy that engulfed Jack’s body in fire, burning him from the inside out.

“...How did you answer him?”

“I told him I didn’t feel the same. He’s my precious family member, but I can’t return those feelings, even if he really does love me.”

“I see.”

The anger, or whatever it truly was, seemed to drain from Dark’s eyes. It looked like he understood that my love for Jack was platonic, and despite his possessiveness, his rage didn’t run out of control like Jack’s did.

“Now I understand why Jack was keeping his trips to the East End a secret from you. But to think he broke himself out of jail just to come give you that ring. It’s certainly bold.”

“He didn’t escape. It was the Mirror Demon who led him here.”

Jack had slipped through a mirror that led straight to my bedroom. It was set up for him to escape, even if he didn’t want to do so of his own free will.

“First the message at the crime scene, and now the forced jailbreak. It’s almost like someone is trying to set Jack up to take the fall,” I said.

“His name alone wasn’t enough to incriminate him. But why would anyone be after that guard dog of yours? And what connection do the Mirror Demon and the real Jack the Ripper share, exactly...?”

Dark began to poke at the glass shards and remnants of the

cup with his cane. Every last one of the blue flowers had been crushed to bits.

"I don't know why they would trap me inside London either. But it's sure helped me grow closer to the Liddell family, and interestingly enough, I even got to come to your rescue tonight... *Hmm?*"

Dark cocked his head in response to his own words.

"Perhaps the Mirror Demon wants to lend a hand to my love life?"

"That's a silly reason to create a barrier around the entire city of London."

"But it's possible. This is a demon we're dealing with here. They'd spring right to action, even if their purpose is something unreasonable. I experience that very same urge to act whenever possible, if it will help me obtain the object of my desire."

A suspicious light glinted in those blue eyes of his. Dark stared at me with a cheerful expression. Seeing him like this was a reminder—no matter how kind he may be at heart, he was still a demon on the inside.

But I didn't find it frightening whatsoever. It was part of "Alice's" evil side.

"...I'll be sure to find that demon," I declared. "I'll never be satisfied until I see them perform a full *dogeza* for getting Jack mixed up in this mess."

"What's a *dogeza*?" Dark asked.

"It's a custom from a country in Asia. They have a lot more than just samurai and hara-kiri over there. I'll tell you all about their culture some other time."

Once I stood up, I immediately realized I was in trouble. Jack had taken me here straight from my bed, so I was completely barefoot. I couldn't exactly walk across a floor covered in broken glass.

"Dark, will you escort me back to the Liddell manor?"

"I'd be happy to, my lady. Or should I say, 'my princess.'"

He scooped my body up in his arms like a prince, turned his back to the large cross on the wall, and began to walk forward. As the evening breeze blew in from the broken stained-glass window, I felt a sudden tickle in my nose.

"*Achoo!* ...Not again..."

The scent of black pepper wafted up to me.

With it came the realization that perhaps I was actually being watched by someone who smelled of pepper...

Chapter 5: The Tragedy of the SS Princess Alice

JACK'S escape was the top news in London the next morning.

The police statement only noted that “the suspect escaped his cell by destroying a worn-down lock,” but made no mention of my temporary kidnapping whatsoever.

If the ton found out that a noblewoman was put in danger due to police incompetence, the cops would never hear the end of it.

Nobles already had to spend their days with the ever-present threat of having their wives or daughters kidnapped. If they learned of my abduction, I imagined they'd storm Scotland Yard and demand a crackdown on criminals throughout the kingdom.

Inspector Dodo, who hated inefficiency, probably wouldn't heed such calls. He was only after the briefest possible series of events—put Jack on trial, have him found guilty, and wrap up the Jack the Ripper case once and for all. Preventing lighter crimes wasn't his job either way.

In the first place, the only person who would enjoy such a “heart-racing jail escape event” is either a sadistic demon or someone who's sick of normal otome game tropes, like me in my past life.

Logically, I knew Inspector Dodo himself could not be the Mirror Demon.

The most likely suspects in terms of new characters were the Duke of Sharondale, the unexpected Judge Trevor, or the returning Tierra Lockholmes.

However, not one of them had a motive for keeping Dark trapped in London, and this was the problem I now faced. I couldn't think of any benefit in freeing Jack either. On top of that, the reason for the message left at the crime scene, the true killer, and the second victim all remained a total mystery to me.

“I don't understand a lick of it! I'd gladly give up tea and snacks if someone would only give up the answers in return!”

“Mind your manners, young lady. You don't want to let your

hair fall on your food.”

When I lowered my head to the table, Leeds set his coffee cup aside and moved the three-tiered tray away from my hair.

He'd been the mastermind behind today's assortment of raisin scones and cucumber sandwiches. Combined with the prepared fruits at the top of the tray, this was more than enough to satiate us until dinner.

The roses in the garden were as lovely as ever. On either side of me, the twins put down their oversugared milk teas to call out to me.

“Alice. If you worry so much, your tea will get cold.”

“Alice. Even if you don't worry, your tea will still get cold.”

“I know that fussing over it won't help, but just let me get my complaints out once and for all. Ever since Jack was arrested, I've felt like I'm stuck in a dark rabbit hole that I can't climb out from.”

The further I sank into the bottomless pit, the more energy I felt drain from my body.

“The kind of darkness where you can't see anything ahead of you used to be where I felt the most at ease. But lately, it only makes me feel blue. I wonder what's changed...?”

“Oh my. I feel exactly the same way, my lady.”

Leeds patted his hands against both his cheeks.

“My makeup hasn't been applying right these days. I just can't seem to get myself into a good mood either. If only some new information would swoop in and lift us back on our feet, like a clue to the identity of the second victim.”

“That's a good idea!”

Scotland Yard believed that, due to the agglutination of the blood used to write the message at the crime scene, Jack the Ripper must have taken two different lives. Yet, only one corpse had been discovered.

Since I'd prioritized investigating Jack, I hadn't properly looked into this angle at all yet.

“Perhaps the true killer hid the other victim's body somewhere?”

“I sure didn't see a place to hide a body at the crime scene. A corpse would never go unreported either, not even in the East End. They say the best place to hide a leaf is a forest. Where on earth could that corpse be hidden?”

At this prompting, the twins both set their cups down on the

table and piped up.

“Like a pebble tossed in a river.”

“Like a hole dug into a mountain.”

“Dum and Dee have got it! Let’s focus our search on rivers and mountains. We can talk to the nearby residents and ask if they’ve seen any unusual cuts of meat lying around, and if the—”

“You four... May I interrupt?”

A voice came from the opposite side of our garden table. Pressing his hand to his scone-filled lips was Dark—his outfit today consisting of a striped jacket.

His beautiful face had turned as pale as the small white bird pins adorning his top hat.

“I understand why you’re so interested in this case, but won’t you consider putting all the blood and guts on hold until the end of afternoon tea, at the very least? It’s a real appetite killer.”

“Is that so? I’ve always thought that delicious foods remain that way, no matter what conversation they’re paired with...”

The twins and Leeds agreed with my puzzled observation.

“Our custom is to fill our stomachs whenever we’ve got the chance. Can you imagine if an enemy came to attack and the lot of us were all starving? It would be a blatant death wish. How downright pathetic!”

“Victory is assured with a full belly.”

“Victory is guaranteed with a full belly.”

“You Liddells have resilient stomachs. I think I’ll refrain from eating red meat for a while...”

When Hisui heard this, he froze in the act of portioning out scones.

“My lord. Tonight’s dinner. Kidney pie. Full of organ meat.”

“Thank you for the information, Hisui. Well, that’s the worst possible outcome. Please head to the Knightley residence at once and ask them to prepare fish for dinner instead.”

“Understood.”

Hisui set his plate down in front of Dark and scurried out of the room.

Since Jack was away in prison, Dark was still bringing main dishes over to the Liddell home for dinner. He always stayed to watch us eat our meals, gathered up the tableware when we were done, and took it back home again in the evening.

When I asked him if the trip from his mansion, all the way out

in Mayfair, was too taxing to make every single night, he responded with a gentle smile.

“Jack would be worried if you four fell into poor health while he was away.”

This indirect expression of love and caring was just like Dark.

Not even Leeds, who detested Dark, could complain about the arrangement.

Dark is gradually becoming a fixture of the Liddell family.

While he was busy working to support the family of his fiancée, I, on the other hand, was doing nothing in return myself. I decided that once Jack was home safely, I would bring treats to the Knightley residence just like he was doing for us.

Dark had no other family, but he did have a particularly skilled old man who served as the butler of his home. He'd mentioned how, after I finished removing my portraits there, he could now return the Knightley family paintings to the walls. I wondered if I would finally get the chance to see his parents' faces sometime in the future.

I split a scone apart and felt a sudden tickle in my nose. I quickly grabbed a napkin to cover my face.

“Achoo! This has black pepper in it, doesn't it?”

As tears welled up in my eyes, Leeds proudly began to boast about his recipe.

“These are my fabulous new savory scones. The dough uses cheese, bacon, and a bunch of spices to bring the flavors together. The black pepper helps give it a more pleasant smell too. Since Jack isn't around, I went ahead and used whatever ingredients I wanted!”

“A more...*pleasant* smell...”

I thought back to the home of Duke Sharondale and its overwhelming pepper aroma.

They didn't use other unusual ingredients like cheese for scones and cookies. It was very strange that they chose black pepper instead.

Duchess Sharondale had explained that the duke loved black pepper, and that was why they used it in all their cooking. However, there was also the possibility that the overwhelming scent was meant to distract Dark and me from something else.

“Now that I think about it, I never heard that baby cry at all...”

The duchess had kept the baby in her arms, so I was unable to see its face. I wasn't even certain that it had been breathing at all.

"Dark. Do you think that baby we met was alive?"

Unlike in my past life, the birth rate in this world was incredibly low. Somewhere around 20 percent of all live-born children passed away before their first birthday.

Death was so close at hand, Londoners could even purchase special child-sized coffins—not that such a box was enough to bury the grief that a mother felt over the loss of her child.

It wasn't unthinkable that some women would be driven mad enough to cling to a happy delusion instead of face such a grim reality.

"What if the duchess was unable to accept the loss of her baby, and she now keeps it close to her even after it's passed away? Isn't it possible that the family is using the scent of black pepper to cover up the smell of decomposition?"

"What a horrifying theory. But I can't outrule it completely. Let's confirm it for ourselves the next time we meet... Sorry, but can we get rid of these? I've had enough of that black pepper stench for one lifetime."

"All right, all right. Such a weak little man you are."

At Dark's protest, Leeds placed the cover over the tray and took it back to the kitchen. He returned after some time with a single white envelope in his hand.

"My lady, do you have a minute to look at this?"

The scent of black pepper wafted toward me. I quickly pulled out my handkerchief.

"Achoo! I smell black pepper. Is this from the Duke of Sharondale?"

"You've got that right. Poor thing, sneezing like that. You just leave this to Leeds." He sliced the envelope open with a butter knife and let the white stationery slide out. "He's writing to you about the ceremony for the SS *Princess Alice*. He wants Miss Alice to be the one to christen the ship for its maiden voyage on the Thames."

"So the duke's sightseeing tours are finally starting up."

The Liddell family had become the focus of a lot of unwanted attention ever since Jack's escape. As much as I wanted to avoid the public eye right now, the duke was offering me a chance to get closer to him.

Why had he stayed silent about his connection to the victim?

Did he really see Jack near the crime scene, or was it at the pub? Was the baby in Duchess Sharondale's arms actually alive at all?

I had a mountain of questions I was eager to dive into.

"I'll accept the role. I don't want people to think we're in hiding because of the jailbreak. I'll need to find a dress for the ceremony too."

"Allow me to send you a proper ensemble for that day. I'll happily escort you too, of course."

"Right..."

As my fiancé on paper, Dark was the natural choice for my escort to the event. I had never attended a ship-launching ceremony before, so I had no idea what kind of outfit was appropriate either. Leaving that up to Dark would be one less obstacle for me to deal with. However, I was unable to see a more fitting escort for this event than Leeds.

"I'm sorry, Dark, but I want Leeds to go with me. I'll need his stigma to expose any of Duke Sharondale's lies. Since we don't know what's going to happen, I'd like you to wait somewhere else close to the ceremony. Also..."

I took a sip of black tea. It had been brewed with piping-hot water, but it'd already grown cold. In all things, it was important to skip the overthinking and simply fill your belly while it's still hot.

"I'd like to invite the talented young judge as well. It will be helpful for the upcoming trial."

I was already prepared to make use of the new connection I'd formed. Dark looked pleased to hear this.

"I see. I'm sure he'll be thrilled to be invited, as the man who's a self-proclaimed 'ally of righteousness.'"

"I feel bad for deceiving him, though..."

Despite this comment, I didn't particularly feel any guilt or doubt about my actions.

After all, I was Alice, and my "evil" nature put me square on the opposing side to righteousness.



"WHAT a great success of a launch. I'd imagine these ice cream stands and coffee shops are going to see record profits. That crowd of people on the road over there...would probably mean that Miss

Tierra is selling her Sweet 'n' Chilly London Ice Cream."

"She's here from Sharondale Garden on a business trip. Miss Tierra is quite the businesswoman, isn't she?"

Ten days had passed since I received the invitation.

Dark and I stood on the second-floor balcony of a restaurant near London Bridge, looking out at the river Thames.

The real Thames of the Victorian era was famous for its pollution and sludge-filled waters. But perhaps because this world was that of an otome game, most of the grime and dirt had been eliminated, leaving clear, safe water behind. It didn't smell as horrid as the Whitechapel district did either.

If it did, I'm sure we wouldn't have such a crowd out here today.

The sightseeing boat, the SS *Princess Alice*, was connected to the bridge's rails by strings of colorful ribbons. Since I'd heard that the *Princess Alice*'s planned use was to carry passengers downstream on the Thames, I was picturing a much smaller vessel, but the real ship looked large enough to sail across the ocean.

At the bow was a figurehead of a beautiful goddess, placed there to guide the ship safely in its travels.

A launch ceremony was held for newly completed ships about to make their very first trip on the water. Traditionally, an unwed woman would break a glass of champagne against the hull to bless the ship and ensure its safety in future voyages.

I was selected for this role because of my shared name with the ship, although its true namesake was Queen Victoria's daughter, Princess Alice, and it had no connection to me whatsoever.

Ships are commonly named after women because the regular act of repainting them is said to be reminiscent of applying makeup. Another theory is that because the male crew members who work on the ships grow attached to the vessels, they prefer to treat them as if they're women.

I wondered if I was the only woman out there who felt a sense of affinity with these fellow female ships.

"All the nobles have returned to their home territories at this point in the season. It looks like most of the crowd are regular townsfolk."

Dark held up his pirate-like brass spyglass and surveyed our surroundings. The double-buttoned coat he had on today made him look like a naval captain. With a white lacy scarf, the main piece to his outfit was the top hat complete with a large compass taped to it.

“The Duke and Duchess of Sharondale are going to enter the boathouse down at the foot of London Bridge. I see Her Grace is carrying a bundle in her arms as well. The duke and duchess look to be nestling up to each other today.”

“I wonder how genuine their expressions of love really are, seeing as how the duke had a mistress on the side.”

I thought the duke to be a cruel man, taking a lover while he had a wife at home. If my husband did such a thing, I’d sock him in the face and file for divorce. Although, since most marriages between nobles were about politics instead of romance, and taking a mistress wasn’t outside the norm, it was also possible that Duke Sharondale had his wife’s permission to see another woman.

Still, she must be upset. It’s a terrible thing to be cheated on by your husband.

Wanting to be the only one your partner loves and cherishes isn’t too much to ask. This fact remained constant, regardless of borders, dimensions, or even becoming the occupant of an otome game. There would always be people who lived by such hopes and ideals.

I’m sure Dark would never do something like that.

I cast a glance at him. Even though I knew Dark to be an earnest person, the sensitive side of my heart still left me uneasy.

Dark was an attractive man. Plenty of young ladies were also eager to earn the title of Countess Knightley as well. It was hard to say that he would never come across a girl who possessed better qualities than I did.

Should an otome game heroine really be worried about getting cheated on?

As I looked at Dark, uncertainty swirling around in my mind, he caught sight of my gaze. He lowered his spyglass and smiled at me.



“Am I really that captivating?”

“Certainly not. I was only wondering why my dress had to match your outfit.”

I was wearing the dress Dark had sent to me beforehand.

It was made of the same lacy fabric as Dark’s scarf, with black ribbons running against the lines of my body and a sailor’s collar on top. A small compass rested atop my hair, pinned to a naval hat. The many similarities between our two outfits weren’t possible to pass off as a coincidence.

“I wanted us to match. It’s my little way of having you all to myself, since I won’t get to be by your side today.”

He took my right hand in his and placed a kiss on the ring that Jack had given me.

“Leeds will be your escort, but Jack and I will be with you in spirit. Bill Trevor should arrive later too. If you can draw any lies out of Duke Sharondale, call for me right away.”

“I will. I’ll do my best to get on his good side.”

I left the balcony and descended to the first floor of the restaurant. It was filled with Londoners who were there to watch the launching ceremony. Some tables were occupied by couples enjoying tea and conversations, while others were entire families enjoying lively meals together. A young girl and the elderly woman with her sat at stools by the front entrance, humming nursery rhymes together as they waited to be called.

Duke Sharondale’s business is bringing smiles to so many people’s faces.

It was the same thought that came to me when I saw the pleasure garden that he ran. If he simply wanted to maximize profits, he would cut out all the fancy things like garden maintenance, fireworks, and hot air balloons. The most efficient method would be to gather as many people as possible for the shortest amount of time.

But the duke didn’t do that. He created a peaceful place where people could go to relax and enjoy different activities. The endeavor wouldn’t be a success unless he was caring enough at heart to know exactly what his guests most wanted.

Why would such a wonderful person cheat on his wife...?

As I continued to walk, pondering this topic, I felt my shoulder collide with a man who was passing in the opposite direction. I

staggered and looked back him, when my eyes were caught by the snake-shaped clasp on his spectacles.

“Aaaaah! My glasses!”

The man desperately trying to stop his glasses from falling off his face was none other than Trevor.

He wore his usual judge’s robe, but for today, I noticed the special *SS Princess Alice* badge being sold at stalls was pinned to his red sash.

In his own way, he seemed to be enjoying the festivities as well.

“I apologize for bumping into you, Judge Trevor.”

“M-M-M-Miss Liddell! I’m so sorry! I was wandering around aimlessly. Thank you so much for inviting me to the launch ceremony!”

Trevor apologized profusely, then started to look around me.

“Is something the matter?”

“Um...are the angels with you today, perchance?”

“The twins are waiting at home. I have another guard with me today.”

“I see...”

I felt bad for the evident heartbreak he displayed, so I invited him to come visit my manor and see the twins some other time before we parted ways. Dark had rented out the second-story balcony of that restaurant and asked Trevor to watch the ceremony with him.

If I managed to get any revealing information out of the duke, Trevor would serve as my reference so that he could testify to the police.

“Sorry I took so long, Leeds. Shall we?”

Leeds had been waiting outside the entrance to the restaurant. He wore a slim-fitting black suit and his usual scarf. It was reminiscent of a look I might have seen in my past life. The bright pink color of his outfit was eye-catching, while the accents of his chain belt and the snake piercing on one ear brought it all together.

Judge Trevor had a snake theme to his outfit too. Are snakes popular right now?

I wasn’t at all knowledgeable when it came to things like fashion trends. I had access to Leeds when I needed help in those areas, so I never had to learn any of it for myself. If it weren’t for Jack the Ripper, the idea of acrostic jewelry wouldn’t have crossed

my mind whatsoever.

Leeds stuck his head out from the front entrance, looking for anyone suspicious on the nearby streets.

“Let’s go, my lady.”

After his signal, Leeds escorted me out of the restaurant. The riverside paths were all so crowded, I felt like I was on the verge of losing sight of Leeds if I let my guard down.

“With this many people around, it’s hard to tell who your enemies are...”

Couples strolled along the river, enjoying their ice cream together. Children gathered under trees along the riverbank for picnics. Passersby stood and gawked at the sheer size of the boat itself. But when I began to cast suspicion on each of these people, they all turned to potential threats in my mind.

“We never know when we’ll encounter someone with a grudge against our family. Be sure to stay alert.”

The Liddell family, as operators of a business in the underworld, were despised by many souls. Therefore, my father had raised me to defend myself from assassination attempts. I knew exactly how to stay alert of my surroundings, handle an attack, and even fire back against assailants. The more combat techniques I knew, the higher chance of my survival.

Inside my pochette was a handgun I carried for my own protection. I didn’t imagine that any ordinary young noblewoman was capable of walking around with such a terrifying item on their person, but its danger was what made it a necessity to me.

With my hand resting on Leeds’s arm, we made our way further down and began to get a better sense of the sheer scale of this sightseeing boat.

The ship was over two hundred feet long with a total weight of 432 tons. One of its unique features was its two large smokestacks used to emit smoke from the internal steam engine, and the British flag and an embroidered crest from the Sharondale family decorated the masts.

Across the ship’s hull was the name *SS Princess Alice*.

Most ship names were written from the bow to the stern, but when I noted that the name read as *Ecila* to me instead of *Alice*, I realized that this ship’s name was inscribed in the opposite direction.

We arrived at the boathouse, which resembled a cozy log

cabin.

The staff, who were busy preparing for the ceremony, announced our presence, opened the door, and presented us to the Duke and Duchess of Sharondale, who rose from their seats.

“Well, if it isn’t the star of today’s show! You look as lovely as ever, Miss Liddell.”

“Thank you for your kind words. Lord Knightley personally selected this dress for me. Unfortunately, he won’t be able to attend today’s ceremony, but he asked me to give you his regards.”

“I’m just glad to hear he’s busy at work. Don’t worry, Miss Liddell, as I’ll be sure to look after you today. Let’s make it a lovely ceremony, shall we?”

The duke wore a gentlemanly three-piece suit and silk hat, while his wife wore a dainty two-piece dress of her own.

The bundle in her arms was wrapped in the same flower-patterned blanket as the last time I met with them.

I noticed the faint scent of black pepper in the air too. Since there was no food around us, I assumed the aroma must have seeped into their clothes.

That baby sure is quiet again.

As I stared closely at it for signs of life, the duchess smiled peacefully, like the holy mother herself, and clutched the bundle closer to her.

“Is something the matter, Miss Liddell?”

“Not at all! I’m simply nervous, as it’s my first time attending a launch ceremony. I certainly hope I can break the champagne glass correctly. In fact, I think I’ll do some stretching, so that I can release the tension from my body.”

I raised my hands in the air and stood up on my tiptoes, attempting to steal a peek down at the contents of the blanket, but the duchess angled herself away just slightly—enough to hide the sight from me.

I stretched over from side to side, up and down, like I was in some kind of aerobics class. With perfect timing, the duchess turned her back to me and began to prepare a milk bottle.

She’s a tough one, that’s for sure!

I’d been so close to confirming if the baby was dead or not.

I sent Leeds, who was standing at the back of the room, a pleading look for help, but he simply shook his head.

The duke was also beginning to cringe at my sudden need for

exercise. I decided it was probably best to let this go for now.

Fine, I'll give it a rest. But once the ceremony is over, I'll get to the bottom of this with the duchess. I also want to find out if she knew about her husband's connection to Jack the Ripper's victim.

The staff came to call for us, and with that, I had to part ways with Leeds for a while.

The duke and duchess walked on either side of me as we made our way down to the pier. When I waved up at the rows of onlookers gathered against the rails of London Bridge, the people's faces lit up and they smiled back at me.

They all looked so merry. It was hard to believe that such a gruesome killing had only recently taken place in their midst.

The three of us lined up at the riverside, and a loud fanfare of brass instruments began to play, signaling the start of the ceremony.

Duke Sharondale, the boat's owner, started us off with an introduction.

"As I look up at the sunny sky overhead, I could hardly picture a more perfect and blessed day for the SS *Princess Alice's* maiden voyage. I first aspired to own a sightseeing boat when I was..."

Speeches, no matter what country they were made in, always seemed to drag on. With nothing to do while the duke was speaking, a staff member came over to show me the bottle of champagne they kept inside a vanity case. It was made with green glass and sat atop a stand covered in velvet. As I read the label, Duchess Sharondale whispered to me.

"The champagne you'll be using today is of fantastic quality, Miss Liddell. The hull is nice and sturdy, so even a young lady like yourself should be able to crack the bottle against it. Please don't be so nervous."

"What happens if I'm not able to break it?"

"They say it's supposed to be a sign of trouble to come for the ship's future voyages. She might run aground, sink, or have her crew constantly at each other's throats."

This was much more responsibility than I ever anticipated. Even though it was far too late, I came to the realization of just how thoughtless I'd been when I accepted this duty.

"With that being said, I wish that you all may take in the best of sights upon this vessel with your sweethearts, families, and friends at your side. It's now time for the traditional breaking of the champagne bottle by a beautiful young lady. Miss Alice Liddell

joins us today for the christening. Miss Liddell, will you do the honors?"

"Yes, Your Grace!"

I called back to him and began to walk down the pier. I could feel the excited eyes of all the onlookers fixed on me.

They'll be so let down if I don't manage to break it!

I collected the bottle from the staff member, took a deep breath, and tried to quiet my mind.

Calm down. As long as I don't panic, I'm sure it'll be fine.

"Miss Liddell will now commence with the christening."

Duke Sharondale's introduction sparked a drumroll from the band members. The rhythm crescendoed and grew in volume.

Just as the tension had peaked, I heard the crash of cymbals being struck.

Now!

I dug my feet into the pier and flung the bottle straight at the ship. It tumbled through the air, collided with the hull, and split apart with a hearty crash.

Golden, foaming champagne dripped over the body of the ship while fanfare sounded out, announcing my success. I mentally struck a victory pose.

I did it!

"Splendid work. Let's hear some applause for Miss Liddell!"

I curtsied at the eruption of cheers from the audience. With a sense of accomplishment, I made my way back to the duke and duchess. They were both smiling at me.

Duke Sharondale wrapped up his speech, then Duchess Sharondale and I returned to the boathouse with him. The duke reached out to shake my hand.

"You threw that bottle with perfect form. I'd assumed that all young ladies were physically weak, since they're so prone to fainting, but I see you've got some good arm muscles there. Do you participate in any sports?"

"I go shooting from time to time."

I returned the duke's handshake, and with my opposite hand, I covered up my pochette.

The iron handgun I hid from him was heavy, and the recoil when firing it was intense. I had to train with it regularly if I wanted to remain steady.

But regardless, the reasons women tended to faint were things

like corsets being too tight, suffering from anemia, and carbon dioxide poisoning from leaving candles burning in closed rooms.

They weren't simply feeble by nature. However, women didn't correct this misunderstanding, as seeing them faint made men feel more protective of them.

I let out a dainty giggle so as not to appear an exception.

The people of this world have no idea just how tough an otome game heroine needs to be.

Games only have so much time that the story can last.

In a school setting, the game ends when graduation arrives. In parallel universes, the game ends after one final, large event to finish out the story. Recurrent mini games and events in different routes are necessary to get through in order to raise your affinity with the love interest character of your choice.

Some games required much simpler lives to most efficiently move through the story. The player could merely spend the mornings defeating enemies, go out in the afternoon to trigger different events, and stay put in their room at night so that they can meet with their chosen love interest.

The heroine is making more and more story progress, all while she looks disinterested in romance on the outside.

While the player is tasked with the very easy job of tapping or clicking on a screen, the heroine must possess tremendous physical strength, emotional resilience, and potential in order to act. "Alice" is no different in that sense.

I forced a smile onto my face to lighten the mood. Duchess Sharondale chuckled and got my attention.

"You did a lovely job christening the ship today. When Lord Knightley hears of your work, I'm sure he'll be saddened over the fact that he didn't get to witness it for himself. Dearest, now that the ceremony is over, may I have some time to speak with Miss Liddell by myself?"

The duchess rocked her baby as she asked for her husband's permission. He looked somewhat relieved.

"Absolutely. You're welcome to use our boat for your talk. Shall I take the baby for you?"

"No, that won't be necessary. Well, Miss Liddell? Shall we?"

"Of course."

The duchess headed toward the exit of the boathouse. I followed behind her and cast a glance at Leeds, who was still

waiting against the wall.

I'll keep Duchess Sharondale busy, so take care of the rest for me.

Leeds nodded his head just slightly. As we passed by him, he stuck his tongue out at me.

I saw the black rose stigma had already formed on its surface.



ONCE the duchess left with Alice, Leeds and the Duke of Sharondale were the only people left in the room. The duke opened a celebratory bottle of wine that had been chilled in an ice bucket and poured some into his own glass.

The gentle scent of grapes wafted throughout the room. Leeds sniffed at the air but couldn't detect any of the black pepper smell that seemed to bother Alice so much.

"You must be Miss Liddell's bodyguard. Are you sure you shouldn't go with her?"

"I'm sure. I wanted to speak with you, Your Grace..."

"Oh? What about?"

Leeds closed the distance between them, keeping a friendly smile on his face. He placed his hands on the duke's shoulders, steadying him in one spot, and leaned close to his ear to whisper.

"I place you under my command."

Duke Sharondale's arms fell limp. The wine cork slipped from his hands and landed on the ground.

With glassy eyes, the duke repeated Leeds's words.

"I...am under...your command..."

The trap had been laid. Leeds's power, known as Liar's Tongue, was the ability to control a person's thoughts and actions by whispering into their ear.

A stigmata's power was understood to have unpredictable effects on the human body. Since the effects of the Liar's Tongue, as a power used on others, were still unclear, Leeds only used it when he absolutely needed to, or when he had Alice's permission, like today. Leeds would never disobey an order from Alice—even if it meant the death of the person under his control.

"You will tell me everything you know about Jack the Ripper."

Duke Sharondale's eyes went wide when he heard the order. He gulped, pressed his hand to his throat, and sank to the ground.

Beads of sweat formed on his furrowed brow.

“Whoa, there. You all right?”

Leeds patted the man on the back and began to consider what was happening.

The duke might be experiencing side effects of the stigma’s powers, or maybe he was struggling too hard to resist his orders...

But when Leeds removed Duke Sharondale’s hands from his throat, hoping to help him breathe more easily, what he saw underneath was a round crest hovering above his skin. The circle was filled with illegible letters that Leeds had never seen before.

“A demon’s seal...!”

Demons only branded a human when they resurrected them from death, or when they were controlling the actions of a living person.

This could only mean one thing—an unknown demon wanted to silence Duke Sharondale from sharing the truth about Jack the Ripper.

A chill ran down Leeds’s spine.

“If a demon has control of the duke, then the duchess might be in the exact same situation.”

He quickly undid his stigma’s power and set the duke down in a chair.

Leeds raced out of the boathouse and looked around in every direction but couldn’t spot Alice or Duchess Sharondale at all.

“Where did they get to...?”

Rows of people lined the pier, eager to board the sightseeing boat for the first time. London Bridge was packed with onlookers. If the best place to hide a leaf is a forest, then the best place to hide a person is a crowd.

“Miss Alice! Where are you?!”

Leeds sank into the crowd of people, desperate to locate the girl he cared about so much.



“**THIS** here is our family boat. I know it’s a bit old, however.”

Duchess Sharondale had led me along the river to a spot farther away from London Bridge. A pathway diverted from the main road and traveled underneath an area that was well-concealed

by a grove of trees.

We circled around the vegetation and boarded a small roofed boat that was tied up to a stump. Despite the fact that she'd just recently given birth and was probably spending nearly all her time at home ever since, the duchess's footsteps were light and nimble.

"Have a seat, Miss Liddell."

"All right... *Eek!*"

The boat swayed violently, knocking me down into one of the wooden seats.

"Careful, now," prompted the duchess as she sat down next to me. Just then, I heard a loud wail from the bundle in her arms.

It's alive!

"Oh dear. Did the tremor scare you? Don't cry, baby. There's nothing to fear."

I began to grow embarrassed as I watched Duchess Sharondale cradle her baby, lulling it back to sleep with a gentle tone of voice.

The simple act of consuming more black pepper than usual at their home had led me to believe this woman was walking around with a child's corpse in her arms. Regret filled me to have jumped to such a hasty conclusion.

"I apologize for jostling the boat. May I have a look at your child, Your Grace?"

"Absolutely. He's a healthy little baby boy."

Duchess Sharondale gladly held out the bundle in her arms. It was then that I came face-to-face with the chubby face of a perfectly normal baby.

Right away, I could see that he'd inherited his father's nose, and the way he smiled innocently at me—a total stranger—reminded me of his mother's personality. With soft skin and delicate strands of blond hair, the boy looked like the spitting image of an angel that one might see in religious artwork.

"I sometimes forget just how cute babies can be."

"Yes, aren't they? They're meek, delicate, and completely dependent on you for survival. There's no one on this earth that a baby can't charm. I hope your children with Lord Knightley can become friends with my boy someday."

"Um... We haven't thought that far ahead yet..."

I started to blush. Duchess Sharondale seemed to find this amusing.

"You're such a cute girl when you turn shy. I just know that

Lord Knightley will cherish you as his adorable bride. I hope you two can start a large family together. I only wish I'd been able to give my husband children of our own."

"...What...?"

She spoke as if she'd never given birth herself, and yet, she cradled a baby in her arms, showing every sign of devotion to raising the child.

"Then where did this baby come from?"

As soon as the question came out of my mouth, I realized that it probably wasn't an appropriate question coming from a total stranger. The duchess rocked the baby again, now with a distant look of sadness in her eyes.

"He was the son of my husband's mistress."

"His mistress...? You're raising their child as your own...?"

The Duke of Sharondale's mistress was the woman killed by Jack the Ripper.

Trevor had told me that the duke refused to acknowledge the child as his own, and that was why Kate Edward sued him for the child support payments she was owed. But that trial ended up dismissed after she was found dead. I didn't hear what happened to the child after that.

So this is where he ended up.

The baby had stopped crying. The duchess was looking down at him with a gentle gaze. I could hardly imagine the compassion in her heart, caring so deeply for the child who must be a constant reminder of her husband's betrayal. Was she truly happy like this? Did she feel the same painful lump in her throat like the one I felt now?

"I'd be furious and heartbroken if my husband put me in that position. You truly don't hate him for what he's done?"

"Hate him? Absolutely not. He's my husband!"

She didn't seem to understand my point of view. Her eyebrows slowly lowered.

"His mistress is dead now. I'm the only choice left to take care of this baby, as his wife. Besides, he's much kinder now that we've taken in the child. He sees me as his wife and true love now."

"I don't think that's entirely true..."

"You don't?"

She was clearly taken aback. It pained me to point out the truth to her, but if I dropped the subject, I feared she'd remain tied

to a false, empty love for all her life.

“Your Grace, Duke Sharondale hasn’t accepted you as his wife. He’s only being kind to you so that you’ll care for the baby he had with his mistress. It’s nothing more than cowardice!”

“Does it really matter either way? Humans are imperfect, foolish creatures. Can you really say you’re different, Miss Liddell? I see that ring on your finger...”

The duchess spoke much more bluntly than I was used to hearing. She reached out and grabbed my right wrist.

I was still wearing Jack’s ring on my ring finger.

“Wearing gems from Jack the Ripper himself? You don’t want to drive your fiancé away, do you? Now that Lord Knightley finds himself stuck here in London, you have the perfect opportunity to improve the relationship between the two of you. Just think how awful it would be if he decided he didn’t want to marry you anymore.”

There was a distinct venom to those words, which sounded so kindhearted on the surface. I shook her hand off and took step after step backward until I was up against the wall.

“How did you know that Jack gave me this ring? And also about Dark being trapped in London...?”

The only people who knew about the demon’s barrier keeping Dark within London were Dark’s household and my own.

I knew Dark wasn’t foolish enough to let that fact be known to the Sharondale family, including the duchess herself.

There was only one other person who could know about its existence—the very demon who put the mirror there in the first place

“Are you the Mirror Demon, Duchess Sharondale?”

The question came out of me hesitantly. The duchess let out a heavy sigh.

“So this is where it all comes out. Acting like a human is dreadfully difficult...”

Her voice began to warp as if it were coming out of some kind of machine. The gentle features of her face remained unchanged, but from underneath her flaxen hair, a single horn started to emerge. Horns were a trait that every single demon shared.

While I stood there frozen, her baby began to make a fuss again.

“Oh dear. Is someone hungry?”

She spread her gloved hands and formed a square, rippled surface in the air. It was as if she'd summoned the surface of a vertical lake. She stuck her hand inside and the hand disappeared, like she was reaching into a box. When she pulled it back out, she was clutching a baby bottle.

"I took this from the other side of the mirror. It makes child-rearing so much easier, and yet my husband finds it distasteful. When he asked how I could do such a thing, I let him get a good look at my horn, and that was the last I heard of it."

Duchess Sharondale smiled cheerfully as she recalled the duke's look of shock.

"My silly husband said he never would have married me if he knew I was a demon. Well, it's too late for that, isn't it? Humans are such terrible fools!"

"If you think we're such fools, then why did you pretend to be one?"

I croaked the question out from a dry throat. The duchess's face became serious.

"...Because I fell in love."

She stuck the bottle in her baby's mouth. I watched the gentle smile return to her lips.

"Now that you know what I really am, I can't allow you to leave this place alive, Miss Liddell. I'll have to find another young lady for Lord Knightley to marry. Perhaps a dimwitted one, so they never catch on to anything strange about me."

A wave rippled through the duchess's body, and she disappeared entirely. A second later, she was standing on the riverbank with her baby in her arms. The horn I'd seen on her head vanished without a trace.

"I'm sorry it had to go this way, and I hope you'll forgive me. I have to protect my own happiness, or it will just slip away from me completely."

With her baby in one arm, she used her other hand to remove an axe from the nearby stump. She swung it up and brought it down on the rope tying her boat to the stump.

"What?!"

"Farewell, Miss Liddell. May you enjoy your final trip in this world."

She tossed the axe into the river and sped away from the boat. Now that it was separated from the shore, it began to drift out into

the center of the Thames.

She set me adrift. I have to do something!

I rushed to the captain's seat but found that the mechanisms for controlling the screw propeller had all been removed. I had no anchor or oars to work with either. There was nowhere to run.

As I waved my arms at the shore for help, the passersby returned my same gesture.

"Thank y— Wait, no! Somebody! Help!!"

I cupped my hands together to cry out toward the shore. The people started to stir, noticing that something was wrong. I'd managed to convey that I was in trouble. All that was left was to wait for rescue to come.

I breathed a sigh of relief. But just then, a shadow fell over my boat.

"What...?"

Raising my head, I saw none other than the bow of the SS *Princess Alice* looming overhead. My own boat appeared to have drifted straight into its path as it set out on its maiden voyage.

Unlike cars, there's no easy way to stop a boat. You can't simply apply breaks to the water's surface. Everything from halting to turning directions required the use of a propeller.

The mighty ship was more than enough to smash my boat to bits, now that I was in its way.

Who the hell added a death flag like this?!

I racked my brain and decided it was best to jump into the river. But at this distance, it was likely that I'd be sucked into the propellers and ground to bits.

Should I let the ship crush me to pieces? Or the propellers beat me to a pulp?

The only two options I foresaw were cruel. But just then, a feather from a blue bird drifted down before me.

The bird flapped its wings, soared across the water's surface, and landed on the goddess figurehead at the *Princess Alice's* bow.

If only I had wings, then I could easily escape the danger...

But then it hit me.

I don't need wings to fly!

"There's nothing a bird can do that I can't!"

I retrieved my handgun from my heart-shaped pochette.



I was aiming almost straight above my head. Alongside the figurehead was the bar that controlled the deployment of the ship's anchor. I shot five bullets at the hole meant for the anchor's rope. Three of them were direct hits.

The lever shifted and the rope began to move. The heavy iron anchor plummeted toward the water, letting out a terrible scraping sound.

I hiked up my skirt and darted to the front of my own boat. It wasn't a long trip, as the vessel was a tiny one.

I placed my hands on the bow of the boat where the painter rope was tied up. That's when I felt it.

"!!"

A violent impact rocked my boat—reminiscent of the sensation of being hit by a truck.

The anchor's fall split my boat in two and plunged toward the bottom of the river.

With it, the bow and stern were sent surging up in the air. I used the momentum to leap up and reach for the *Princess Alice's* railing.

"That's it!!"

But it wasn't to be. My hand connected with only air. I felt the blood drain from my face.

Oh no...

My body turned upside down. I was falling back toward the broken remnants of the boat down in the river.

I squeezed my eyes shut, prepared to hit the water headfirst. But I never felt that impact.

Something wasn't right. Gently, I opened my eyes to a shocking sight.

"I'm floating?"

My body was suspended in midair alongside the majestic hull of the *SS Princess Alice*.

But the ship didn't look right. Strangely, it appeared to be missing a single piece, much like a jigsaw puzzle. The empty hole was filled with cookies and meat roasts, and they all had the same strong smell of black pepper that I remembered from the Sharondale home.

I lifted my head to see that the *Princess Alice* was on the other side of the wreckage too. But it was facing the opposite way. The

anchor and rope that had just split the boat into pieces were on the other side of the ship now.

“What’s going on?”

I swam through the air like a fish, comparing both ships with each other, when I noticed something in particular.

The one piece of debris I couldn’t see was missing from the boat in front of me.

Every piece that I could see was perfect, while everything else remained a mess.

The up and down directions were switched because the reflections in the water were now creating the world around me.

It could mean only one thing.

“It’s the mirror world.”

In the most unexpected of ways, I’d become lost on the other side of the mirror.

Chapter 6: Alice in the Mirror

“**THEY** still haven’t found her?”

Dark was scowling down at the Thames from the edge of the pier. The ship’s propeller stirred the surface of the water, scattering the remnants of the small boat all over the river.

Alice had been the only person on the crushed boat.

She’d drifted away from the shore, waving to the onlookers on London Bridge for help before her boat was struck by the SS *Princess Alice* on its maiden voyage.

Furthermore, its anchor fell upon the boat by mistake. Her boat was split in two, sending Alice flying into the river.

A search party was initiated right away. But they hadn’t found any sign of her yet—not the dress she was wearing, her shoes, pochette, or a single trace at all.

Inspector Dodo had rushed to the scene when he heard the news. Over and over again, he opened his pocket watch to check the time.

“Lord Knightley, it’s been three hours, six minutes, and twenty-three seconds since the collision. I’m not sure how much more we can do...”

“Pipe down, Inspector Dodo. Alice is still alive. Call the search off, and I’ll chase you down to the ends of the earth. You think you’re ready for that?”

Inspector Dodo, after being so casually threatened by Dark, sensed the danger he was in. He lashed out at a passing officer with slumped shoulders.

“What is the search party doing?! We need more men for a thorough search of the riverbed. She could have been swept downstream too, so make sure they search the entire river!”

It was a senseless channeling of anger. With that, Dark walked back from the pier and headed toward the riverbank.

Duchess Sharondale was seated in front of the boathouse. Her husband, the duke, was doing all he could to console her.

“Your Graces.”

“Ah, Knightley. Have they found Miss Liddell yet?”

“They haven’t. I’m having them look downstream next.”

“Ngh... This... This is all my fault...”

Duchess Sharondale was burying her face in the bundle in her arms, but she raised her head to look up at Dark. She’d been weeping ever since Alice’s accident, believing it to be her fault. Streaks of tears still remained on her cheeks.

“Miss Liddell and I were speaking on our family boat, but my son got hungry and started to cry, so I left to privately nurse him behind the bushes. Miss Liddell wanted to look at the river from the boat while I was gone. But then the boat drifted away from the riverbank and crashed into the *Princess Alice*...”

“That boat should have been tethered to the riverbank with a rope. Inspector Dodo told me that someone cut the rope with an axe. It was attempted murder. It’s not your fault, Your Grace.” Dark leaned in to whisper to the troubled duke, “Her Grace seems rather exhausted. What with the baby and all, I suggest you two return home for some rest. I’ll stay here and wait for word from the police.”

“I appreciate it. Keep your head up too, Knightley.”

“Thank you for thinking of me.”

Dark hung his cane on his arm, bowed to the couple, and left in the opposite direction.

The crowd of witnesses was starting to disperse, since the search had proved fruitless after all this time. Staff members closed up the parasols of their stalls and ice cream stands since night was drawing near.

Dark returned to the balcony of the now-empty restaurant where he found Trevor waiting for him. The judge rushed at Dark, his face desperately fearful.

“Y-Y-Y-Your Lordship! What’s become of Miss Liddell?!”

“Not a trace of her has been found yet. Not even her hairpiece. It’s most troubling.”

“I see... I’ll bet the impact with that ship was terribly intense. She might have been knocked unconscious and sent down the river. I really hope she’s all right...”

Dark had witnessed the collision from this same balcony.

With his spyglass, Dark watched as Alice shot at the large ship’s anchor and sent it crashing into her own boat. She’d tried to leap onto the *Princess Alice* with the momentum of her boat being

split in two.

But it wasn't enough. With that dress Dark picked out for her fluttering in the wind, Alice had fallen to the river below.

When he rushed to the scene, Duchess Sharondale was already weeping in shock while her husband desperately tried to console her. Inspector Dodo busied himself with gathering witness reports and didn't think to send for rescue until later.

Dark had ordered all nearby ferries to be gathered on the river, but it took as long as twenty minutes before the ferrymen could come together to form a real search party.

Three more hours passed. Alice was still missing. That initial delay had almost certainly proved to be fatal.

"Go home, Trevor. Waiting here won't make anything happen."

"I want to be of help if I can. But I'm powerless, so I'll probably just be in the way... If you see those angels, would you be so kind as to tell them to keep their chins up?"

"I will."

The busy judge made his way down the stairs, anxiety still plastered all over his face. Dark took another look at the Thames and was heading for the stairs as well, when he spotted Leeds leaning against the first-floor railing.

Leeds had tried to jump into the river himself after the collision, only to be stopped by police officers long enough for him to finally give up. He'd struggled violently to escape their grasp. The shirt of his suit was deeply wrinkled and the cuffs of his trousers were dirtied with mud.

"Lord Knightley, I swear, I'm on the verge of slitting my own wrists. I should've gone with Miss Alice instead of staying behind to speak with that silly duke!"

"With a ship that big, you wouldn't have been able to escape disaster either, Leeds. But you used your stigma on Duke Sharondale, didn't you? Did you learn anything new?"

"He never said a word about the case, but not because he was clueless. Some demon was controlling him, making sure he didn't run his mouth."

Leeds explained the seal he'd witnessed appear over the duke's neck. When Dark heard the description, he immediately recalled that crest on the mirror in the middle of the road.

"That sounds just like the Mirror Demon's seal. It was circular

and filled with indecipherable text too.”

If the Mirror Demon was responsible for Jack the Ripper’s victim, that meant they also wrote the wall message that pointed to Jack and forced Duke Sharondale, the witness, to shut his mouth and provide only false testimony to the police.

The essence of the problem was the Mirror Demon’s identity.

If they only knew that much, they could use whatever means necessary to free the duke from the demon’s powers, drag the true culprit into court, and set Jack free for good.

I’ll get to all that later. Right now, the only thing that matters is finding Alice.

Dark abandoned that line of thought and raised his head to look at Leeds.

“I’ll send word as soon as Alice is found. Leeds, you ought to return home and be with the twins. It’d be best to inform the whole family...but should that include Jack right now?”

“Jack would burn down his cell and take the entire police station with him if he caught word of this. Or maybe you feel like sparking another Great Fire of London?”

“I’d prefer not. I feel for the poor guard dog, but I think we’ll keep it a secret for now.”

“...You know, Your Lordship.” Leeds began to twirl his ponytail with his fingers. He wore a gloomy look on his face. “Don’t you have the *power* to know where Miss Alice is right now? You found her that way when Jack kidnapped her, right?”

“I *should* know.”

Dark struck his cane against the floor and closed his eyes.

He stopped himself from taking in any external information, listening only to what he heard from inside his own body. With the image of his crescent-moon crest in mind, Dark searched for the sound of breath from the girl he’d branded that seal to—the girl he loved so much.

“.....”

It was as if she were passing by him on a parallel street. Dark opened his eyes and saw nothing but empty chairs and the vivid white cloths covering the tables around him. There was no trace of Alice whatsoever.

“I feel like she’s close. I just can’t see her. Her presence is faint, almost as if she’s using the Tweedles’ stigma, or like it’s only her soul that is left.”

“Just her soul...”

“If that were the case, I’d have to escort her to hell myself.”

Dark had just indirectly announced Alice’s death to Leeds, who glared sharply at him.

“You’re certainly relaxed, considering you just implied that my lady might be dead. Should I take that as the extent of your love for her?”

“Do I seem like I’m calm to you?”

With the slightest of smiles, Dark lifted the brim of his hat. Underneath, Leeds could see the proof of Dark’s true identity as a demon—a pair of horns emerging from his head.

It would be the end of him if anyone caught sight. But he was simply too frantic to keep them hidden away.

“Don’t tease me right now. I’d do anything in the entire world to bring Alice back. You nearly jumped in the river yourself, so I know you understand my feelings.”

Dark’s eyes were brimming with fury. Leeds felt as if he might be ripped to shreds if he let his guard down around him.

Though Leeds had seen the earl as a man who simply skated by with his title in order to live a life of aimlessness, he understood now that the man was not like other humans. Dark Arland Knightley was a demon, and beneath a placid smile, he kept that terrifying truth lurking just under the surface.

“I’ll be on my way now. Take care on the way home.”

Dark set his hat back in place before leaving the restaurant. Once his broad shoulders were out of sight, Leeds let out a heavy breath, feeling as if he’d been resurrected from the land of the dead.

“Phew! Angry enough to show his true colors. What a hard man to get a read on.”

But Leeds wasn’t unamused by Dark’s behavior. Perhaps such a strange man was actually the perfect partner for a flower as poisonous and resilient as Alice.

“It sure isn’t my place to say, but, why, I think I approve of him as Miss Alice’s fiancé. So long as he finds her alive, of course.”



“IT’S so quiet...”

Completely alone, I wandered through the streets of London—

or more precisely, the London that existed on the other side of the mirror.

Not a single other soul existed in this world, where left and right was reversed at all points. The streets were empty of carriages. Factories were still and silent. No wind could be felt to rustle the leaves on the trees. It was sheer and perfect tranquility itself.

I tried visiting the restaurant next to London Bridge, but Trevor wasn't there on the balcony where I'd last seen him. I couldn't find Leeds at the boathouse either.

Knowing Dark's nature, I assumed he would be at the riverbank to search for me, but I never once heard his voice as I made my way along the Thames.

I concluded that staying put wouldn't do me any good, so I decided to start pacing the streets of the city aimlessly, hoping to find a passageway back to the real world or something of the sort.

It hit me that perhaps a large mirror would be the portal I was looking for. I found a boutique with a full-length mirror at the front of the store and threw myself against it, but only succeeded in sending searing pain through my body as I bounced off the glass fruitlessly.

"*Ngh!* I guess it won't be that simple, huh?"

As I continued down the street, I cautiously kept my pistol ready in one hand. The single stroke of good luck I'd had was that, since I never went into the river, my gun remained dry and able to shoot if needed. My ammo, however, wasn't much to speak of at all.

I'd run out of bullets right away if a lesser demon appeared and attacked me.

When I arrived at the tearoom at Oxford Circus that Dark and I had visited before, I discovered something strange.

"What on earth?"

Once I passed through the Western-style stained-glass door, the place I stepped into was none other than a large field of grass. I turned around to see that the wall was only a standalone fixture, decorated to look like the exterior of the tearoom.

"It's like a movie set. But the restaurant by the Thames had the same decorations and furniture that I saw before..."

I didn't understand what made the two places different. I tried to head off in the direction of the Liddell manor but found that the road itself disappeared once it reached private property. The space ahead of it was nothing but a white fog I couldn't see past.

This is more than just a world where everything is reversed. Since everything you see in a mirror comes from things you can see in real life, the Mirror Demon...Duchess Sharondale must have created this entire world from her own knowledge.

I again changed directions and walked toward the East End.

The scene of the murder was cleaned up long ago, but here, I saw that Jack the Ripper's message still remained on the wall. It was hard to read, as the letters were in reverse, but the writing appeared fresher than the time I'd seen it for myself. The message before me now had only just been left there. I could even see the puddle of blood in the alleyway.

Duchess Sharondale must have been at the crime scene on the night of Jack the Ripper's murder. She saw the message written in blood but never went back to the scene after the police cleaned it up, which is why it still looks like this in her memory.

I searched the surroundings but wasn't able to find the second victim.

"I guess it won't be that simple..."

The sky had grown dim as night fell on this part of the city. With no road back to the Liddell manor, I was unable to return home for the night. I was pondering where in London I should spend the night, when I found that my legs had naturally carried me to the National Archives. My past life had instilled a habit in me of visiting the archives whenever I was at a loss for information.

I passed easily through the back gates, which had no guards out on patrol in this mirror world. The door to the archives was unlocked too.

When I entered the reference room, I heard something rattle nearby. I looked out the window and saw none other than the reflection of Dark against the nighttime cityscape.

He was looking around in every direction and calling out my name.

"...Are you in here, Alice?"

"Dark!"

I placed my hands on the window and yelled for him. But he didn't seem capable of hearing me.

He continued past me, clueless to my attempts. I pounded on the window but couldn't produce any sound on the other side. The worlds that Dark and I existed in had become completely separated.

"It can't be..."

Loneliness and torment flooded my heart. I clutched at my pained chest. But through the lacy fabric of my dress, I felt a different body heat gently warming my fingertips.

That's right. I have the stigma Dark branded me with!

I pressed my hands together and began to pray. It was then that I saw the crescent moon seal arise from my chest.

"Deliver this message to Dark. I'm right next to him!"

A white band of light expanded from my stigma. It folded over and over again, forming a cocoon-like mass that shot forth through the window.

Dark was suddenly overwhelmed with light. When he turned to the window, his eyes went wide. The girl he'd been searching for was faintly reflected right there in the glass.

"Alice?"

"Yes, I'm here!" I pressed both hands to the window and began to explain what I could. "As soon as I fell into the Thames, I became trapped in the Mirror Demon's world. She was the Duchess of Sharondale all along. She's the one who put the mirrors on the roads and trapped you in London!"

Dark watched me in silence. His beautiful face appeared somewhat troubled.

"I can see your mouth moving, but I can't hear your voice."

"I thought so..."

We were so close, yet not a single one of my words reached him. I stood there, disheartened, when I noticed Dark pointing to a pen and paper on a nearby desk.

"Write it down and show me. I should be able to read it through the glass."

"Okay."

I took the pen in my hand.

One by one, I explained the mirror world, the message at the crime scene, and what happened before I crashed into the SS *Princess Alice*. Then I held up the paper for Dark to read.

Once he made it to the end, he grimaced and set his cane down on the ground.

"I can hardly believe the duchess is the Mirror Demon. I've made a discovery of my own too. Leeds tried to use his stigma to interrogate Duke Sharondale about the case, but a demon's seal appeared to stop him from speaking. I believe it was the crest of the

Mirror Demon.”

“That must mean his wife has control over him. In that case, who else could be the true killer but her?!”

Duchess Sharondale stabbed Kate Edward, her husband’s mistress, and controlled the duke to make him testify that he saw Jack at the crime scene. She also left the message on the wall.

Then that means the second victim must be...

I was lost in thought about the Mirror Demon when I heard something hit the glass in front of me.

I realized that Dark had placed his hand against the window. I could see the pain in his expression.

“Meeting the Mirror Demon and losing your boat like that must have been dreadful. You’ve done so well on your own.” His large hands stroked the glass where my cheek would be. “What a shame. If only I could give you a hug and a kiss. But I just can’t.”

“I’d love nothing more than a hug from you right now...”

Dark cocked his head, and I wasn’t sure if it was because he’d figured out what I said. I pressed my lips to the window and saw him join me in a kiss, even though all I felt was the cold glass against my skin.



But it was the first time in so long that I felt like I'd touched another person. Tears began to form in my eyes.

"Don't cry, Alice. I'll find a way to get you out of the mirror."

I nodded, and the door to the reference room opened. Hisui peeked his head inside.

"Your Lordship, a guest. The judge."

"Lord Knightley, I'm so sorry to bother you this late at night. The police said I'd find you here."

It was Trevor who now appeared. Dark quickly shut the curtains, leaving me to only listen to their conversation.

"How is the search for Miss Liddell progressing?"

"It's been called off for the night now that the sun has set. We can't let anyone else become a victim due to our recklessness. They're going to search downstream first thing tomorrow morning."

"I see... I know this is dreadful timing, but a trial date has been set for the Jack the Ripper case. They want to settle things quickly, now that the suspect has escaped custody once and is seen as a potential danger."

"Very well. When is the trial?"

"Three days from now, at three in the afternoon. I'll be the presiding judge in the case, since my boss forced me to take over for him."

Jack's trial date was already set. I gripped the curtains.

We know who the real killer is, but now I have to figure out how to get out of here.

It was in Jack's best interest to have an earlier trial. Even if I couldn't leave the mirror world, all I needed was to convey my logic to Dark, have him expose the duchess, and bring about a verdict of innocence.

But I don't think Jack...wants Dark to come to his rescue...

I looked down at the ring on my right hand. Its acrostic words of love were a stinging reminder.

Jack only went to extremes because I'd relied on Dark far too much. That night he escaped jail and abducted me was the first time I realized just how dependent I was on the man.

I'd behaved disgracefully as the head of the Liddell family. That was why Jack feared I was planning on abandoning the family name altogether. He decided to take matters into his own hands and ended up suspected of being Jack the Ripper as a result. All of it

was my fault.

For Jack's sake, I have to get out of here before the trial.

From the other side of the curtain, I overheard their continued discussion of the trial.

"With your permission, I'd like to act as Jack's counsel. Could you save five seats in the courtroom, on the defendant's side?"

"I can do that. But do you really need all five?"

"We do. They're seats for Jack's family and Alice."

The mention of my name cast a faint flutter in my heart. Dark had faith that I'd be able to escape the mirror world in time. His trust was more inspiring of bravery than what any words of consolation could offer me.

"That reminds me," Trevor went on, after finalizing the seating for the trial. "Duke Sharondale agreed to adopt his mistress's child, which means the end of the child support case against him. His wife seems to be raising the baby as her own already. Have you had a chance to meet?"

"I've only seen the duchess carrying a bundle, but I haven't met the little one yet. What do they call their baby?"

The name Trevor shared with Dark struck me as odd.

I feel like I've heard that name before...but where...?

I snapped out of my thoughts when the curtain opened in front of me. Dark was peering into the mirror world.

"Trevor's gone home, Alice. He says your guard dog has a trial date. If we want to save him, then we really can't delay. How shall we confront the culprit?"

I wrote my response onto paper and held it up.

"There's something I want to know for sure. I'm going to visit the Sharondale estate."

"I'll go with you. I'll keep my cane with me so that I'll know what you're doing on the opposite side of all the glass and mirrors. If you hear its sound, you'll know I'm nearby. Got it?"

With that signal decided on, we both set out for town.

I raced down the gas lantern-lit streets without a single passing soul to get in my way. The passage of time was hard to grasp in the mirror world. If I let my guard down, I felt that each moment would slip away. It was already as if I were trapped inside an eternal night.

The air around me was chilled. It was hard to believe I'd ever witnessed a sunny afternoon in this world. But like a cup of freshly

poured tea, it couldn't remain warm forever.

Love was no different.

Summer would never return to the Mirror Demon, no matter how desperately she cried for it. The murder happened in the first place because she didn't seem to grasp this truth.

When I arrived at the Sharondale manor, I was surprised to see the property in a state of disarray. I made my previous visit by carriage, so I never caught a glimpse of the rusted gates or weed-infested garden.

The world I was in was supposed to be a reflection of the things Duchess Sharondale remembered. I wondered if the real world looked identical to this.

I pried open the heavy front door and checked to see if anyone was inside.

"Pardon the intrusion..."

I traveled down the hall, footprints visible on the dusty floor, until I reached the parlor.

The home was arranged the same way I remembered it from my real-world visit. But this time, there were stacks of baby bottles and cloth diapers all over the table.

The duchess must have reached into this room when she created her floating mirror earlier. As convenient as it seemed for child-rearing, the room was filled with piles of garbage, which didn't exactly seem hygienic to me.

I reached for the cloth-covered mirror above the mantel.

"If I'd torn off the cloth that day, I might have been able to see all the baby bottles."

I gently lifted the curtain and immediately saw a shadow pass right before my eyes. I nearly yelled out in shock, but I managed to keep the cry inside me and shift to a blind spot in the mirror.

Who's there?!

As I clutched at my racing heart and peered inside the mirror, I saw that the duchess herself was pacing the room. She cooed softly to the bundle in her arms.

"You're such a good little boy. But it's time for bed now. If you stay up all night, I'll do the same thing I did to your father, and you'll never be able to say the things you want to anymore."

"Your Grace."

A stone-faced kitchen maid called out to the duchess.

"Earl Knightley is requesting to see the duke."

“How unusual, so late at night. Did they pull Miss Liddell out of the water yet?”

The duchess thought I’d died in the boat accident. She didn’t seem to sense that I was on the other side of the mirror that divided worlds.

“I’d feel bad sending the poor man away, now that he’s lost his sweetheart. Show him here. Most of the servants have quit, so this is the only clean room available. My husband has to get changed first too. Oh, I’ll have him wear a neckerchief that matches my dress. Wait here for me, dear.”

She set her baby on the sofa and left the room.

Once I’d heard her footsteps grow distant enough, I flipped the curtain back up. Dark entered the room on his own, spotted me in the mirror, and sent a smile my way.

“Sorry to make you wait... Oh, I see there’s already a little visitor on the sofa. Good evening.”

The baby stretched his tiny hand out toward Dark and giggled.

“This is the only clean room in the manor, huh? It’s not every day that an earl is greeted by a kitchen maid. I bet she’s the only servant they have left, and that’s why the house is in such a foul state.”

“*What do you mean?*”

I showed him the message I’d written on the paper I brought with me.

“There’s a rumor that the servants of the Sharondale home are treated cruelly, so they never stay around very long. These large houses can’t be maintained well without a large staff. Some fear for the wife’s position in situations like these, as she’s the one in charge of hiring the servants...”

“*Duke Sharondale probably can’t chastise his wife, since he’s under her control.*”

“But still, the duke maintains many areas of work, including his pleasure garden and the sightseeing tours. Even if he can’t vocalize it, it seems like he should have other means of seeking help. Maybe we’ve missed something...”

Dark stroked his chin. I’d reached the same conclusion, but I couldn’t think of any secret signals from the duke that we might have overlooked.

“Hi there. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Duke Sharondale entered the parlor. I immediately dropped

the curtain and crouched down low.

I'd caught a glimpse of the duchess standing behind him, and I couldn't help but wonder if she'd spotted me. I nervously quieted my breath. But the curtain was never pulled back.

I heard the springs of the sofa creak. Duchess Sharondale had picked up her baby so the duke could sit down.

"Did they find Miss Liddell yet?"

"No, they haven't. I've had the search called off for the evening. I'm too overwhelmed to return home right now, so I apologize for showing up like this."

"I'm the one who should be apologizing. If I hadn't asked Miss Liddell to christen the ship, she never would have gone anywhere near the Thames, and this whole mess might have been avoided. I'm the *Princess Alice's* owner, and I'm responsible for the accident."

As the duke began to confess his guilty conscience, I heard the baby start to grumble.

"Oh dear. You can't go crying in front of a guest. Do you need to be changed?"

A ripple formed above the table on my side of the mirror. The duchess's hand slipped inside and grabbed a cloth diaper from the massive pile. I imagined she was doing this behind her back where Dark couldn't catch a glimpse of what she was up to.

The scent of black pepper hit my nose. I desperately covered my mouth.

She'll know exactly where I am if I sneeze now!

I held my breath with all my might. As Duchess Sharondale drew her hand back to the other side and her lacy sleeve approached the frame of the mirror, something shiny fell from it.

It hit the floor and rolled all the way under the sofa.

What is that thing?

I dropped to the floor and crawled over to the sofa, which I stuck my hand under. Eventually, my fingers landed on something solid. I pulled it out and came face-to-face with an acrostic ring almost identical to the one on my right hand.

It was larger in diameter—meant for a man to wear—with a row of gems put together to spell out a single word.

A ruby, emerald, garnet, amethyst, ruby, and diamond spelled out *regard* from left to right.

The word was a common way of describing one's affinity for a person, but now that I had certain information, I understood exactly

why those gems were chosen for the ring, and with it, the solution to the mystery of the black pepper as well.

I heard the tapping of a cane in the distance. Dark had left the room.

Following the sound, I walked out of the parlor and made my way out of the house itself.

I had to strain my ears to keep up with the cane as I traversed the night streets. From every object that might provide the tiniest reflection—puddles on the road, shiny metal poles, little glass windows—I heard the sound of Dark's cane as I passed.

Finally, I traced it to Dark's destination on Oxford Street.

All the luxury shops were already closed for the evening, but their storefront windows served as mirrors against the darkness of night as they reflected the gas lanterns.

Through the large window, below the shop's name written in a fancy style of lettering, Dark and I met face-to-face in the reflection.

"I found this at the Sharondale home. It's a man's size."

I showed him the ring the duchess had dropped when I was in the parlor. Dark peered through the glass to get a closer look at my hand.

"It doesn't look very worn. It must have been made quite recently."

"They sold acrostic rings at the shop where Kate Edward worked. I'm fairly certain that she had this ring made for Duke Sharondale."

The duke had come to the East End for the purpose of claiming this ring. He met with the victim at the pub where Jack worked, saw his new baby, and then...

"On the way home, they were attacked by the true culprit, and that's when the demon put him under her control."

"That's a horrifying theory, Alice." Dark clapped his hands together with enthusiasm at the idea. But then his eyes drooped sadly. "We can't have you testifying in court like this, though. What say we place a giant mirror up on the witness stand?"

"That would be quite a shock to the crowd, wouldn't it? But don't worry. I've come up with a way to leave the mirror world for good."

"And what would that be?"

I drew a large circle on my paper, making sure it was visible to Dark.

"First, I'll need a tart baked with heaps of black pepper in it."

Chapter 7: The Lovesick Demon

“I now call to motion the case of Jack the Ripper.”

In the fifth courtroom of a certain royal courthouse in Aldwych, it was finally time for Jack’s trial to begin.

The room was large enough to accommodate fifty observers. A magnificent portrait of Queen Victoria hung at the very back of the courtroom, surrounded by paintings of various Supreme Court judges throughout history. These portraits looked down on the judges seated in their brown benches. In the very center was the presiding judge—Bill Trevor.

On either side of the benches sat twelve men and women of all ages. These were the jurors in this case. Without their consent, not even the presiding judge could declare the suspect guilty or innocent.

The judge had the highest seat in the room so that he could survey the proceedings in their entirety. Directly in front of him was the witness stand. The defendant sat to the right, the prosecution, to the left. Finally, a few tables were set up to display the investigation records and evidence in the case. The area around the large courtroom’s doors was open seating for the public, with a few rows at the front roped off, intended for parties associated with the case.

It was customary for the defendant’s lawyer to sit with them at their table. But today, Jack’s lawyer was back in the reserved seats section. Earl Knightley, dressed in a black top hat with a large bow and a black cape around his shoulders, sat in one of the five chairs reserved by Trevor. Leeds and the Tweedles were at Knightley’s side, with nervous expressions on their faces. One chair remained empty.

The visitors’ seats, on the other hand, were filled with Londoners there to witness the sensational murder trial of Jack the Ripper. The ones holding pens and notepads were most likely members of the press. Some men and women—here to gawk at the spectacle—were wearing outdated clothing distinctly behind the

times. Among the crowd were the Duke of Sharondale, dressed in a gray three-piece suit, and his wife, clutching a bundle wrapped in a flower-patterned blanket.

“Bring in the defendant.”

At Trevor’s order, the handcuffed Jack was led into the courtroom. He wore the same butler’s uniform as the one he was arrested in, but his fatigue seemed to have left his face more sunken-in than before. His expression was gloomy, as if he were about to be sent away to hell itself.

When Jack reached the defendant’s table, Inspector Dodo stood up on the prosecutor’s side and opened his pocket watch with an audible click.

“The trial is now two minutes and thirty seconds past the scheduled starting time. Jack’s guilt is basically assured, so there’s no need to waste more time by going through with this entire trial.”

“Order!”

Trevor slammed his gavel against the desk and cast his eyes to Jack.

“Defendant. You have the right to remain silent in the face of questioning. You have the right to voice your own perspectives. All testimony you provide will be used as evidence, regardless of its effect on your case. Finally, you must swear to God that all of your statements will be the absolute truth, and disregard any outside attempts to influence that truth. Very well. Let us proceed.”

Once he was finished reading the court procedures, Trevor moved on to the trial outline.

“The defendant is accused of the premeditated murder of Kate Edward. The prosecution believes that he stabbed the victim, who managed the Sharondale jewelry store, in an alleyway of the Whitechapel district on the night of July fifteenth, and is subsequently seeking the death penalty. Let’s begin with opening statements. The defense attorney may now step forward.”

“That would be me.”

It was Dark who stood up to speak. The cane in his hand was topped with a white horse sporting a pair of gems for eyes, and it tapped against the floor as he proceeded forward. Jack simply stared at him with blatant contempt.

“Don’t glare at me like that,” Dark whispered to him discreetly. “I’m here to stand in for Alice. She’s...had something come up, and she’s going to be late. Just bear with me until then.”

“Miss Alice is coming...?”

Dark never told Jack about the shipwreck or how Alice got lost in the mirror world.

Upsetting Jack, who was already nervous about his trial, wouldn't be of any help to Dark now. If Jack lost control of his emotions and activated his stigma in front of this crowd, he would never be able to return to his normal life again.

“I swear to tell the whole truth, so help me God.”

Dark raised one hand up, and with that declaration, he was officially recognized as Jack's attorney.

“The defendant, Jack, was spotted walking near the scene of the crime on the night of the murder. He was merely on his way home to the Liddell estate from his job at a nearby pub. Jack had no motive to kill this woman, nor is there any proof of his guilt. He is an innocent man.”

But Inspector Dodo stuck his long neck forward in rebuttal.

“Objection. The declaration of guilt at the crime scene used the name *Jack*. The defendant also made a break from the jail he was being detained in. This is all solid proof of his criminal nature. Jack the Ripper can be none other than the Jack before you!”

“Gimme a break! What bloody idiot of a murderer would leave his name at the crime scene?!”

“Calm down, Jack. You have to keep a cool head in a courtroom, or you'll just make yourself look worse.”

After this warning, Jack cast a glance over at the jurors. They were writing notes on a blackboard with chalk for later use. The sound of the chalk being eroded chiseled away at the thoughts inside his own head as well.

Dark tapped his cane on the ground and turned to look at the prosecution.

“Inspector Dodo. I understand that you despise wasting time in any aspect of your life. It's an admirable trait, but it's affected your treatment of this investigation. You merely apprehended the most convenient Jack you could find without the proper scrutiny. While the case may appear to be solved, the true culprit remains free as a result. Jack the Ripper may even be in this very courtroom right now, enjoying the view from the visitors' gallery.”

“Keep your conjecture to a minimum. All the evidence at the scene pointed to this Jack being Jack the Ripper. If I wasn't certain of his guilt, I wouldn't have upgraded him from a person of interest

to the main suspect.”

“But what if your evidence for that claim came directly from the true culprit?”

“What did you just say...?”

Inspector Dodo began to mutter to himself, squinting his round eyes in a grimace. Dark tapped his cane against the ground twice, calling for Hisui, who was behind him in the public seating.

“You’ve overlooked something important in your desperation to conserve time. Why not take a break to enjoy a sweet snack and clear your thoughts for a moment? Would you care for a tart?”

Hisui removed the cover of the tray he was carrying. Immediately, the smell of black pepper wafted through the courtroom. The tarts on top of the tray were perfectly normal in every way—except for the excessive amount of seasoning.

Spices were an appetizing scent in moderation, but a nuisance when overused. The people throughout the courtroom pinched their noses and blinked their watery eyes.

Leeds covered the twins’ mouths with handkerchiefs and complained to Dark.

“How foul. You really went overboard on the pepper!”

“This is how food is eaten at the Sharondale home. Isn’t that right, Your Grace?”

From the public gallery, the duke simply stared at Dark in silence. At his side, the once-silent baby began to cry in the duchess’s arms.

“Oh dear, would you look at that? Honey, let’s move to the back so we’re not interrupting anything.”

She stood up and relocated to the back of the courtroom, taking a seat directly in front of the door.

After observing her new position in the room, Dark turned to look at the confused faces of Trevor, Inspector Dodo, and the jury members.

“In order to slice a tart correctly, you must anticipate how many people you’ll be dining with. Criminal cases are no different. We failed to notice the absence of someone extremely important.”

Clack! The slam of Dark’s cane against the ground echoed through the quiet courtroom.



AT that moment, I was crouching low against the floor in the parlor of the Sharondale home. Within my vision was a table covered in baby bottles and cloth diapers. Despite the state of disrepair throughout the house, this one room was well maintained, meaning the furnishings around me were free of dust.

I cast a glance at the nearby grandfather clock. The dial was reversed, but I could tell it was three in the afternoon.

Jack's trial should have started already. I asked Dark to buy as much time as he can. I really hope it's working out.

I wondered if he'd managed to bake a proper black pepper tart. It was on the verge of becoming the murderer Mirror Demon's greatest misstep.

It would also be the key to escaping the mirror world where I currently found myself.

If I manage to make it back to the real world, I'll be able to expose every last one of her crimes.

The plan we'd settled on was a reckless one. But all I could possibly do was have faith in Dark and the tart as I waited for the one, single moment of opportunity to come.

"!"

My nose suddenly started to tickle. I clapped my hand over my mouth. The scent of black pepper was drifting around me from an unknown source.

I was keeping my eyes glued to my surroundings, when a rippled surface, like rays of sunlight reflected on the water's surface, formed in the air above the table. Duchess Sharondale was using her demon powers to connect our two worlds together.

"You must be hungry. Have some milk, dear."

Her hand slipped through the hovering mirror's surface. It felt around the table, searching for its target, then finally grabbed hold of a baby bottle.

Bang!

At the crack of a cane, I immediately focused my mind and steadied my feet against the ground.

"One, two, three!"

Like a pole vaulter, I leaped off the floor and sent my entire body hurtling toward the mirror. My body slipped through its rippling surface, crashing into the duchess as she tried to withdraw the baby bottle.

Duchess Sharondale tumbled from her chair, but not before I

was just barely able to whisk the bundle from her arms, keeping the baby from harm. The startled infant let out a hearty cry, so I rocked him gently, trying to be of comfort.

"I didn't mean to scare you. There, there. You're safe now!"

"My lady!"

It was Leeds who cried out, seeing me suddenly manifest inside the courtroom. When I looked up, I saw that the trial had already begun. Jack stood in the defendant's seat, his eyes as wide as saucers.

I finally made it out of the mirror world!

The realization brought tears to my eyes. I trampled over the railing and crouched with the baby in my arms to let Dum and Dee hug me.

"Welcome home, Alice!"

"Welcome home, Alice!"

"I'm back, everyone... I'm sorry for scaring you."

I was stroking their backs in turn with my one free hand when I felt a tickle deep in my nose again. I tried my best to preserve the silence of the room, but in the face of such an overwhelming stench, there was no holding back.

"Ah... Ah... *Achoo!*"

I let out one powerful sneeze and heard snickering coming from the center of the courtroom.

"We've been waiting for you, Alice."

Dark approached me, held his hand out, and helped me stand up.

"Looks like the black pepper tart was effective."

"It was exactly what I needed to get the timing of my escape right. But... *Achoo! Achoo! Achoo!* I can't seem to stop sneezing. Mr. Hisui, would you be so kind as to put the cover on that tart?"

"Very well."

Hisui covered the tart on his tray, then wrapped a cloth around the outside to prevent the smell from escaping.

The crowd was stirring over my sudden appearance in the courtroom, but since Duchess Sharondale was seated at the very back, they were under the impression that I'd burst into the room through the regular entrance.

No one could possibly imagine that I just escaped from the mirror world.

The baby in my arms continued to wail. The duchess had

fallen to the ground. She stretched her arms out toward me fearfully.

“Give... Give him back... Give my child back!”

“I don’t think so. This isn’t Your Grace’s child. His only parent here is the Duke of Sharondale.”



With that blunt rejection, I rushed over to the duke. He'd been wearing a pained expression on his face as he kept his mouth closed, but I showed him the baby so he'd know the boy was safe.

"I promise to protect your son, Duke Sharondale. Now is the time to tell the truth about Jack the Ripper. My family, the police, and the law itself are all on your side."

"But I... I can't."

"I understand. I'm going to undo the demon's control over you."

I closed my eyes and focused. Once I'd drawn out the image of the crescent moon seal in my mind, I felt the branding of Dark's stigma start to grow warm on my chest.

May Duke Sharondale's voice be freed from its prison.

Beams of light sprang from the seal on my chest and wrapped around my fingers. I placed them against the duke's throat, bringing the demon's seal to the surface of his skin. It hovered in place before vanishing in the blink of an eye.

He pressed his hand to his neck, unable to believe what was happening. But then relief washed over his face.

"Thank you, Miss Liddell. Now I can safely confess to my misdeeds."

The duke walked forward to the witness stand. He raised his hand and vowed to tell the entire truth.

"Allow me to amend my testimony about the defendant. The story I told the police about witnessing Jack near the scene of the crime was true. But he didn't kill Kate, the victim. The true culprit is Susie, my wife!"

There was a sudden commotion in the courtroom. As the jurors looked on in awe, Duchess Sharondale, who was still on the floor, blinked her eyes and didn't even bother to fix her disheveled hair.

"What on earth are you talking about, dear...? Even joking about me being Jack the Ripper is absurd. Please, everyone, do give this some thought. Do I look like a murderer to you?"

The courtroom was sympathetic to the duchess. She hardly looked like she could hurt a fly.

But the duke refused to budge.

"The head of the Liddell family will be the one to reveal the truth. What do you say, Miss Liddell?"

"Of course!"

At His Grace's request, I kept the baby in my arms as I stepped up to the defendant's seat with Dark.

"Miss Alice..." Jack breathed with a sigh. Our reunion made me want to start crying, but I would wait until after his acquittal to pull him into a hug.

I curtsied toward the tall table where Trevor was seated.

"I apologize for arriving late. I couldn't appear earlier, as I was involved in a shipwreck. My name is Alice Liddell, and I'm the head of the household that employs Jack, the defendant. I swear that my testimony in this court will be the absolute truth!"

I let my oath ring loud in the courtroom. It was finally time to unveil every last secret.

"First, I'd like to speak of Jack's mistaken arrest. He was taken into police custody as a person of interest the morning after the murder occurred. The victim's identity was unknown at the time, but we later learned that she was Kate Edward, the manager of a jewelry store. Despite the difference in their classes, she was also the Duke of Sharondale's lover, who had received investment money from him as well. The police were keeping that fact from being known. Isn't that right, Inspector Dodo?"

"W-We did no such thing..."

"The first person who discovers a body would normally be looked at with the most suspicion. That person is the duke in this case. But the police ignored this, declared Jack a formal suspect, and allowed the Duchess of Sharondale, the true killer, to go free."

I looked down at the baby's face in my arms. Luckily, he didn't seem upset anymore. He'd stopped crying to give me an adorable smile.

"This child was conceived by the victim and the Duke of Sharondale. On the night of the murder, the duke met with Miss Edward at a pub to see this baby, and on the way back, they were attacked by the Duchess of Sharondale, the true murderer. She's kept the baby hostage ever since, which is why her husband has been unable to reveal her involvement in the crime. But he sought help silently by making use of black pepper, exactly like the tart you just saw."

Spices could be quite powerful, as evidenced by the effect that the smell of a single tart had on the entire courtroom. Its strong aroma functioned like a security alarm, alerting to the presence of a disturbance, even if the man in trouble couldn't draw any attention

to himself.

“The duke had large amounts of black pepper used in his home’s cooking to signal that something was amiss. Noble families often use spices in their food, but this was far outside the norm. Lord Knightley also remembers a time when the house didn’t smell of black pepper.”

“Miss Liddell is right. I ordered the kitchen maids to use lots of black pepper. Susie’s the one who spread the lie that I’d developed a taste for it.”

As the duke expected, the stench of black pepper was enough to make servants leave, and that’s when a certain rumor began to develop.

“Something is amiss in the Sharondale home.”

The jurors furiously scribbled down notes as I continued my testimony.

“The duchess killed the victim, kept her baby as a hostage, and commanded her husband to stay silent about the murder. He couldn’t disobey her now. That’s why he left a false claim of guilt at the crime scene, naming Jack, who he’d seen at the pub earlier, as the true killer. Inspector Dodo fell for the trap, arrested Jack, and brought him to trial. This is the full story of Jack the Ripper.”

“Enough with your lies!”

Duchess Sharondale let out a cry of denial. She rose to her feet and rushed toward the witness stand, only to be stopped in her tracks by the guards.

Instead, she stuck her head out from around their bodies, determined to be heard.

“I would never take a life, nor would I threaten my husband. Yes, the baby is the son of my husband and Miss Edward, but I love him like my own. I’ve been taking care of him all this time. Come on, now. Give him to me at once. It’s time for a feeding.”

Her gentle expression threatened to sway the room in her favor. The duchess possessed a calming manner that was strangely captivating to onlookers. But I had seen her true nature now. There was no chance of her charms working on me.

“I can’t do that. I’m going to prove that the love you claim for this baby is false. Here, use this.”

I walked up to the judge’s podium and handed Trevor the ring I found in the mirror world.

“It looks like a ring in a man’s size. What exactly is this?”

"This was made in the jewelry shop managed by the victim. It's called an acrostic ring, as the first letter of each gem, when read in a line, spells out a message. The Duke of Sharondale visited the East End to collect this ring from the victim. Isn't that right, Your Grace?"

The duke nodded. Trevor examined the ring from every angle but didn't seem to understand.

"Why does this prove that Her Grace doesn't love her husband's child?"

"Indeed. Miss Liddell, you mean to tell me I don't love this baby because of a mere ring?"

The duchess chuckled. I responded with a firm expression.

"The ring can do that perfectly fine. I have a question for you, Duchess Sharondale. If you love that child so much, then what is his name?"

"His name...?"

She stiffened, so I pressed onward.

"That's right. I've seen you cradling that bundle a few times now, but I've never once heard you call his name. If you love him, then isn't it only natural for you to know his name?"

Her eyes began to frantically survey the room as the jurors and Trevor turned to stare at her for an answer.

"G-Goodness me! I completely forgot to ask anyone what his name is, didn't I? I've been so busy, I guess I just ended up putting it off. Babies are constantly napping and waking up again at all times, and you have to be sure their bellies are full and their diapers are changed too. Do you know how quick they are to start crying unless you carry them around in your arms to cheer them up? I simply didn't have the time. You all understand my plight, don't you?"

But the response in the courtroom was a cold one. The duchess began to grow flustered.

"Why don't you understand...?"

"It's a hard situation to empathize with. You may not know this, Your Grace, but humans always call the name of their loved ones, no matter how busy they may be. May I take this as an admission that you don't know the name of the child you've been raising?"

"So... So what if I don't?! I know *you* don't know that baby's name either!"

A deep wrinkle formed in her brow. It was like watching cracks appear in a broken mirror as fury made fault lines around her eyes, temples, and mouth.

"I do know it. The boy's name is Regard. The word formed by the gems in this ring wasn't a message for Duke Sharondale. Miss Edward had a ring made for His Grace that spelled the name of their son, so that he could wear it during all the times they were forced to be apart."

I stroked the ring on my own right ring finger.

If you can't be with someone, at the very least, you want them to wear a reminder of you on their body. But maybe that human urge isn't something that demons can understand.

"I'm not sure about Miss Liddell's argument. What do you say, Judge Trevor?"

At Inspector Dodo's prompting, Trevor held his glasses up to examine each gem on the ring.

"I see a ruby, emerald, garnet, amethyst, ruby, and a diamond... Indeed, these gems spell out the word *regard* as an acrostic. I remember reading in Miss Edward's child support claim that her son was named Regard, so I accept Miss Liddell's testimony as true. Duchess Sharondale, I'll give you an opportunity to share your rebuttal. What do you say?"

Though Trevor was asking her for her fair say, the jurors were already staring at the duchess with doubtful gazes. Her wrinkled face soured even further, as she'd come to face the truth of the ring's meaning.

"Here I thought that ring was just a cheap little thing that didn't suit my dear husband when I took it. But now I see it contained the child's name. That damn woman was clever till the very end..."

"Take Duchess Sharondale into custody!" Inspector Dodo cried out, and officers quickly rushed to restrain her. The duchess didn't resist. She merely stared at her husband with eyes telling not quite of hatred or resentment—instead, the emotion was sadness.

"My dear, you mustn't forget about me. I'll always love you."

"Sorry, but I only wish I could forget my entire life after I married you."

"Is that...so...?"

I watched her shoulders slump as she was dragged out of the courtroom.

Duchess Sharondale was now going to be interrogated by Inspector Dodo. I imagined her situation was going to be much more intense and stressful than what Jack went through.

A man in the visitors' gallery was frantically scribbling down notes. I imagined he was a reporter, and the front page of tomorrow's newspapers would tell of Jack's false arrest and the identity of the true killer.

Trevor turned back toward the courtroom, now reeling over the twist in the case, and banged his gavel.

"Order in the court! I'm ready to declare a verdict. I find the defendant, Jack, to be innocent. I'll be seeking an investigation into his jailbreak, but he is acquitted on the crime of murder in today's court. ...This concludes the trial."

The release of Jack came so mildly. The guards removed his handcuffs.

Jack was a free man. The look on his face was one of disbelief as he left the defendant's table.

"Welcome back, Jack."

"Welcome back, Jack."

The twins rushed to give him hugs. Leeds followed by patting Jack on the shoulder.

"Well, someone's been busy, hasn't he? Fleeing jail in the middle of the night, making himself look way more suspicious, kidnapping Miss Alice, and even giving her some sort of ring. Why, your selfishness nearly drained every last ounce of patience I had left for you!"

Though he sounded annoyed, I didn't sense any anger in Leeds's voice.

Instead, it was Jack who seemed confused, seeing his family welcome him home as if nothing had happened.

"What d'ya mean 'nearly' drained...? I tried to steal Miss Alice away from you guys. I threatened you and kidnapped her because I wanted her to be mine. Trying to harm the head of the family oughta get me expelled from the Liddell household. The last generation sure would have, anyway."

"So sorry to say that the last generation isn't here anymore. The current head's the one who gets to decide your punishment. If it's mercy you're after, well, look no further for who you have to beg. Isn't that right, my lady?"

When Leeds turned his eyes toward me, I handed the baby to

Duke Sharondale and approached Jack. I kept my expression a somber one, which caused the twins to quickly separate from Jack when they laid eyes on it.

“Jack.”

His face stiffened when I called his name. He clearly didn’t know what he should be feeling as he faced me, now that I’d rejected his once-in-a-lifetime confession of love.

I felt a bit awkward due to this rejection too, but it wasn’t enough to hinder the familial bond we shared.

I raised my arm and slapped Jack across the cheek. The blow caused his head to whip to the side.

“I was so upset. I had no idea you were working nights in another part of town, and I never once imagined you would ever break your promise to me.”

“...I’m sorry.”

“But the person I’m most angry at is me, for never noticing any of it. None of this was your fault. If anyone in this family is worth being fed up with, it’s me, its head, for how terribly careless I’ve been.”

Jack was taken aback by my words. He clutched his reddened cheek and turned to face me again.

“My lady...”

“I left everything up to outsiders, sowed the seeds of anxiety in my family, allowed a member of the household to be arrested because I failed to prevent intruders, and, at the very end, let my guard down and even ended up falling into a river. It’s downright pathetic. If the Mirror Demon had been after the Liddells instead of just Jack, we may very well have been met with ruin. But this case has reminded me of how I must conduct myself as the head of my family.”

It was humiliating, knowing I’d been tripped up in every way the Mirror Demon wanted. But the boiling water I’d been forced to swallow had burned away every unnecessary distraction in my head.

I vowed to never experience these feelings again—not for me, nor for my family.

Leaning against Jack’s chest, I dug my fingernails into his shirt.

“I won’t let anyone take you from me again. Your eyes, your blood, and every last strand of hair belong to me.”

“Ow...”

His face twisted in pain. My sharp nails tore into his skin like blades, staining his white shirt red with blood.

It was like watching a beautiful red rose bloom upon the fabric.

I stared at my wet fingertips. A silly thought crossed my mind—I wanted to leave an unfading scar on Jack’s body like a demon’s branded stigma.

When he caught sight of the ring on my finger, while I continued to press my hand into his chest, Jack let his head slump like he’d come to accept his situation in its entirety.

“Do what you want... It’s your choice to kill me or let me live...”

“Thank you, Jack. I’m very happy right now.”

I smiled at him gently. Removing my nails from his shirt, I quieted my breathing to listen to Jack’s heartbeat.

Though, from the outside, it probably looked like we were embracing each other, what Jack and I were sharing was an emotional—and slightly grim—vow between master and servant.

I’d been entrusted with Jack’s will, his emotions, his life, and his death.

He would never betray me ever again. Acting in his own interests and exposing the family to danger was the same as choosing death. A deep black joy enveloped me, now that I’d regained control over him.

Who else but me could be the leader of the Liddell family? Don’t you agree, “Alice”?

Once we separated, Jack glanced at Dark, who’d been watching us from the distance, and gave him a suspicious look.

“You’re not gonna steal her ring away, like how that duchess did?”

“You put your heart into that ring. I have no right to steal such a gift. It’s up to Alice if she wants to remove it. Besides...” Dark strutted right up to me, raised my left hand, and placed a kiss on my ring finger. “This is the finger I’m more eager to put a ring on.”

“Dark!”

I felt my face quickly flush. But this didn’t persuade Dark to back down. With a beautiful smile, beaming like the moon against a night sky, he continued provoking Jack.

“Good thing you didn’t let your guard dog have this finger for

himself. Guard Dog, I hope you'll continue taking care of Alice as the Liddell family butler."

"Who the hell are you to ask that of me? So bloody annoying..." Jack gritted his teeth and muttered an insult. "I'll never give Miss Alice over to a bumbling idiot like you."

"She's not yours to give, now is she, Guard Dog? When are you going to open your eyes and realize how many steps behind me you've fallen? There's never been a team in history who managed to claw their way out of the loser's bracket and claim the ultimate victory. It's all about staying ahead, after all. Like, for example, all the kisses I managed to give Alice while you were busy being careless."

"You bastard!"

Dark winked, and it provoked a fury in Jack. Jack reached for his hip, realized his saber was missing, then called out to the Tweedles, who were holding hands as they watched over the whole ordeal.

"I'll rip your lips right off. Twins! Gimme your weapons!"

"We didn't bring them."

"We didn't take them."

"Relax, Jack. You can't bring weapons into a courtroom. I've got my belt here, at the very least. I'll lend a hand if you want to shut him up, but you really ought to pick somewhere more private. Please do us all a favor and spare us from having to attend another one of your trials, got it? Good grief."

As Leeds grumbled on, Hisui, behind him, lifted up the large cloth-covered platter.

"Use tart? Stuff His Lordship's throat with tart, and it makes the perfect crime."

"Knock it off, Hisui. Don't sell out your lord like this. Can you lot respect the value of my life a bit more? I worked so hard for the Liddell family. I think it's about time you acknowledge me as a fitting future husband for Alice..."

At Dark's proposal, the twins turned to look at each other.

"Let's consider it later?"

"Let's put it on hold for now?"

"I still can't convince you? The Liddell family is incredibly strict."

The twins had ruled that Dark was to remain as a mere candidate for my future husband.

With the contrast between the celebratory mood and the heated conversations I was listening to, I couldn't help but chuckle.

"I'm sorry for laughing. I'm just so happy to see us all back to normal."

Everyone looked relieved as they noticed the smile on my face.

Though summer had already come and gone, our lives, for a brief moment, returned to a state of harmony.

Epilogue

A carriage took Dark and me down the road that led out of London to the west.

The sky outside my window was sunny and blue. A cool breeze rustled tree leaves and the grassy fields, blowing into the passenger car and tickling my skin as well. It was a reminder that the summer was nearly over.

The Knightley carriage stopped just before the place where Dark couldn't traverse before.

He took my hand and helped me out of the carriage. The world smelled of dry earth and sunlight.

"I wonder what happened to the Mirror Demon's barrier now that Duchess Sharondale has been arrested..."

Dark began to walk down the road. It was the first time I saw him make it past the usual spot where the mirror sent him back the way he came.

"The mirror is gone! Now you can return to your home territory!" I clapped my hands together in celebration. But Dark merely approached me with a look of indignation on his face.

"How cruel, Alice. Are you really that pleased by the thought of being apart from me?"

"You mean to tell me you're *not* pleased? You were the one upset that you couldn't leave London, so why not rejoice? I won't miss you once you're gone, so don't bother worrying about me. We may be engaged, certainly, but we haven't even announced it formally yet. Dum and Dee haven't approved of you either. Don't forget that you're merely a *candidate* for me to marry."

"*Hmm*. Then why don't we call off the engagement?"

"?!"

My body stiffened with shock. But Dark smiled at me softly.

"Just teasing. I won't let that happen. I'm not as simpleminded as your guard dog, after all. This case has taught me that the best way to keep you safe would be to simply lock you away in a cage."

Now that I thought back on it, "Alice" had been kidnapped by

Jack, was involved in a shipwreck, and had been constantly rescued by Dark during the course of this case.

As danger lurked around every corner, Dark did whatever he could think of for me and my family.

“Thank you for your concern. I’ll try not to drag you into my affairs anymore.”

“Is that really what you think? You haven’t noticed that *I’m* the one dragging you into things?”

“What do you mean...?”

I was stunned. Dark began to calmly explain his rationale.

“It’s clear to me, now that the Mirror Demon’s actions have been uncovered. The woman trapped London inside the mirror so that I wouldn’t return to my home territory and be apart from you, Alice. She even wrote Jack’s name at the crime scene because she knew that he, my love rival, was preparing to give you a ring. Do you remember what Jack the Ripper’s message said?”

“I believe it said the killer took a life for the sake of love.”

I’d ignored the message ever since I saw it, only focusing on things that would prove Jack’s innocence, but it was certainly a rather romantic sentence for a killer to leave behind.

Dark drew a heart in the air with his fingers.

“That’s right. The message had two meanings behind it, as it turned out. The first ‘love’ the Mirror Demon wanted to come to fruition was her love for the Duke of Sharondale. The second was my own love for you. The duchess knew, from my consultations with the duke, that I was planning an engagement party for the two of us. She also somehow managed to figure out my true nature as a demon and took it upon herself to meddle in my affairs.”

“Well done indeed.”

A large mirror suddenly appeared between Dark and me. I leaped backward away from the mirror’s rippling surface, in which I could see the face of the imprisoned Duchess Sharondale.

“Without that Jack in the way, I knew your love would go smoothly, Lord Knightley. I caught sight of the boy on the night of the murder, and I knew it was just the chance I needed. I only freed him from jail because it let Lord Knightley play the hero and rush to Miss Liddell’s rescue. I helped you out all because I’m a fellow demon who fell in love with a human, and I’d appreciate your gratitude for that assistance.”

Duchess Sharondale began to emerge from the mirror, little by

little—first her hands, then her head, followed by her legs.

Her dress today was much more reminiscent of a demon, as it boldly showed a great amount of skin at the chest. That single horn was sticking out visibly from her hair. I wondered if she'd grown tired of appearing in human form.

"You're supposed to be atoning for the crime of murder, Your Grace. Please find your way back to your cell."

I whisked my handgun out of the bag I was wearing and aimed it at the duchess. She chuckled back at me.

"Why, I don't think I will. Prison is such a tedious place, and you should hear the interrogations they put me through. What drives humans to ask the same questions over and over again? I'm not given anything but bread and water for meals either. If only they'd splurged for the occasional meat dish or dessert. I would have managed to stick around a bit longer..."

Sure, this woman was nobility, but she was also a murderer. The demon didn't seem to understand the human logic of depriving her of luxurious meals.

"Miss Liddell, you ought to be careful. If you want to build a happy family with a demon, you'll need a great deal to talk about and delicious meals. You should quickly find yourself a skilled chef, or maybe make your servants learn his favorite flavors now."

"I appreciate the advice from a predecessor of mine, but you've meddled in my life quite enough."

Dark slammed his bejeweled cane into the ground. Sparks of light shot out from the tip, drawing out the image of a crescent moon seal at the duchess's feet.

"I won't be modeling my life after a lovesick demon. I pity Duke Sharondale, in fact. He never would have had to become a stigmata if he hadn't fallen in love with you..."

"So you figured that much out, hmm?"

The duchess kept the same pleasant, fearless smile on her face, even when she was being scolded. I felt a cold sweat start to drip down my back, but I kept my gun steadily aimed at her.

"Yes, we know everything already. Duke Sharondale was the second victim that was never discovered, because you resurrected him by turning him into a stigmata!"

On the night of the murder, the duke was stabbed as he tried to protect the victim and her baby. He bled profusely until the life had drained from him. But then the duchess branded him with her

stigma and dragged her husband back to the land of the living.

The killer's message was left with a combination of Kate Edward's and Duke Sharondale's blood, causing the agglutination reaction.

The duchess placed her hand on her cheek and smiled as if thinking back on a fond memory.

"What a thrill it was to brand my husband with my stigma. I was trembling with pleasure to finally have his heart in the palm of my hand. But his feelings toward me never changed... He still loved a girl with no fortune, no beauty, and no status."

"Everyone is free to love whoever they want, however they want. There are plenty of beautiful, wealthy people whose love never comes to fruition."

Love is cruel. Everyone knows this much, and yet they continue to fall in love regardless. Like an inconspicuous rabbit hole underneath a grove of trees, the outward appearance never tells the true story of what lurks underneath.

"Even if nothing ends up as planned, and heartbreak wounds you thoroughly enough that you can no longer continue on, that's your own responsibility to manage. Love must never be a reason to cause others harm. You can never allow yourself to forget that, even if your heartbreak is too much to bear."

The duchess kept a smile on her face as she listened to my earnest declaration. In those gentle eyes of hers, I could've sworn I saw feelings of yearning beneath the surface.

"Humans truly are fools. But that's what makes them so lovable..."

"That's enough out of you. It's time to say farewell, Duchess Sharondale."

"Oh, is that right? Already?"

Dark tightened his grip on his cane, causing the light of his crest to grow stronger. It blazed almost as bright as the afternoon sun itself, wrapping around the duchess and sinking her down into the dirt.

"Miss Liddell. Lord Knightley. I wish you the utmost happiness. From the depths of hell, I'll be watching the love you share as human and demon...the love I never achieved."

With those kindhearted parting words, Duchess Sharondale was sucked into the ground beneath her. The galaxy of light absorbed both her body and the floating mirror in one fell swoop.

Dark had sealed the duchess away in hell. She was never to reach the land of the living ever again. Seeing how little she resisted, I imagined this was her own desired outcome as well. A life on Earth would never again be possible with Duke Sharondale, the man she loved.

The duke and his son, Regard, were under the protection of Queen Victoria's guards, as she knew the details of their circumstances.

It was Queen Victoria, who'd been concerned about the poor safety conditions of the East End, who sent a letter directly to Inspector Dodo, pressuring him on the Jack the Ripper case. That was why the police rushed to make an arrest and why they quickly upgraded Jack from a person of interest to the main suspect as well.

"The Jack the Ripper case is finally over now. Although, the true culprit's outcome will never be known to anyone else. It will be the same as if the case was never resolved at all, but we can't exactly tell Inspector Dodo that the duchess was actually a demon."

Dark released his powers. The light of his crest went fluttering up like fireflies, then faded away into the stagnant air.

"I know it's wrong to sympathize with a murderer, but I do pity Duchess Sharondale. She only wanted to be the duke's wife, and she tried so hard to play the role of a loving mother and doting partner."

"She must have wanted to prove to him that demons can live as humans too. If you hadn't seen through her, Alice, they probably would have kept playing house like that until the duke's feelings for her returned."

"Love between a human and a demon isn't so simple after all."

I didn't know how the Mirror Demon first fell in love with the Duke of Sharondale, or how she managed to become his wife. All I could feel for certain was that she was desperate in her attempt to receive his love.

After all, I was her mirror image—the human who'd fallen in love with a demon.

I looked at Dark, who seemed perfectly content.

"I was raised as a human, so fear not. Besides, my love for you only grows with each new obstacle. Maybe that's *because* I'm a demon, no?"

"I don't think so."

I placed my hand on my chest, resting it exactly where my

stigma lay.

“Because I feel the exact same way.”

My honest revelation drew a pleased, shy smile from Dark. He wrapped me in his arms.

My heart was racing so fast, I felt that the sheer love I had for him might cause my chest to bust.

As long as I feel this way, Dark and I will always be able to walk the same path in life.

Our life together would be a happy one, and when I one day descended to hell, I wished to meet with Duchess Sharondale once more. There I would tell her just how capable a demon and a human were of mutual, unwavering love, even without others coming to their rescue.





A woman sat in a room that overlooked the garden of a stone-walled palace.

Her name was Queen Victoria. She'd come to the unlit servant's room, underneath a flag of Great Britain hung on the wall, to open a letter sent from the Liddell family. The plain white envelope was fixed with stamps for postage, but it showed no sign or receipt from the postal service itself.

That was because this letter had come directly from the sender, with no intermediary but the single deliveryman.

The Queen held the parchment up to a lamp, taking in the sight of the young girl's charming handwriting.

"So, you were able to find the real Jack the Ripper, were you, Alice? But you hesitated to execute the first suspect when he came from under your own roof. It's not exactly becoming of Great Britain's most secret force of justice."

Her Majesty had wished for Alice to execute Jack. It was the only way to ensure that a culprit never again resorted to other crimes.

His potential innocence was of no concern. Nothing mattered more than his silence in death. If only he'd confessed to the crime, then at the very least, the suspect could die knowing he'd sacrificed himself for the good of the kingdom.

The poverty-stricken East End and its low-paying jobs made it a hotbed for political opposition. The people believed the royal family and nobility to be monopolizing all the wealth for themselves, and so they became more interested in turning to crime than in working hard to earn an honest living.

The strange murder that occurred amid this turmoil was the perfect opportunity. Queen Victoria believed that once the culprit was captured, they could quickly be dispensed with divine justice, and the citizens would rethink turning to a life of crime as a result.

Everyone was to believe that they might be next on the chopping block.

But Alice defied the Queen's wish. She investigated the case independently, uncovered new information, involved herself in the trial, and made a mockery of the court by exposing the true

criminal. All the while, she received the support of the man whose engagement rumors Queen Victoria had helped spread herself—Earl Knightley.

She had believed the earl would marry Alice as soon as possible, command the knowledge that came with being part of the Liddell family, and form a new kind of system that remained in line with the Queen's own desires.

"I miscalculated. I thought Alice and her life confined to darkness would be the perfect match for Knightley, considering the secret behind his birth. But if they continue to defy me, I'll have no choice but to force them apart."

"Break up the two lovebirds? That sounds downright demonic, Your Majesty."

A young man sat at the window seat. He showed no formality or restraint in how he spoke to the Queen.

His black suit made him difficult to see in the darkness, but his pink hair and bright scarf made him resemble a mere head floating in midair.

The light caught the snake piercing he was wearing in one ear. Its glint was much like the glowing eyes of a cat in otherwise pitch darkness.

He was neither particularly feminine nor masculine in appearance, but this man had lived a life under many names. The Queen even took a liking to how he treated her, the highest power in the kingdom, as an equal. She thought of him like a son.

"Don't compare me to something so horrid, Cheshire. Why don't you be next in line to pair up with Alice? You're the best actor in all the kingdom. Won't you play the part of the perfect man and make Alice fall in love with you?"

"An interesting question..."

The young man placed his hand to his chin in thought. When he turned his head, his hair fell loosely around his face.

Those dark pink eyes went wide. The corners of his mouth pulled taut into a grin, and to an onlooker, it looked as if his face might split from ear to ear.

"I'll think about it, but no promises. Cats only act on their own whims, or at least, that's what all the textbooks said in boarding school. I'm a real good studier. If I wasn't, how would I ever survive being stuck in between an angry lion and unicorn?"

"A cat with ferocious beasts at its service. It's like something

from a fairy tale.”

As the Queen chuckled, the embroidered flag at her back flapped in the breeze. The crest of a lion and unicorn guarding a shield was a symbol of Queen Victoria herself.

Her influence was impossible to ignore, even in a place like this.

“I’ll be on my way, then. If I don’t get to sleep soon, it’ll wreak havoc on my skin.”

With those parting words, the man left his seat at the window, and the Queen watched the natural color of his hair refuse to fade away into the dark veil of night. As for where he was going, who he’d be seeing, and how exactly he’d be getting to sleep...

“I don’t even want to know.”

Once she’d finished watching the man gracefully stroll off into the distance, the Queen lit a match and brought it to the girl’s letter. The parchment caught fire and turned to a mere pile of dust in the ashtray.

“Your life is only going to get more interesting from here, Alice. After all, you’re the heroine in this wonderful land, which so many people came together to create.”

Silently, in the dead of the night, the wheels of death began to turn.

The foolish Alice had yet to learn just how determined the Queen was to get her way.



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